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THE RUNAWAY
AND OTHER STORIES

BY RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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THE RUNAWAY

AND OTHER STORIES

RABINDRANATH TAGORE



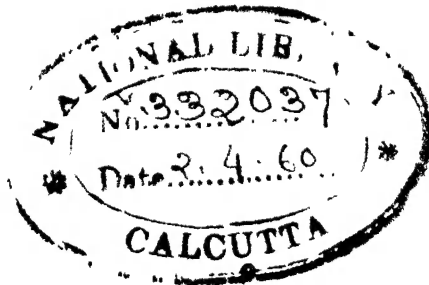
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE TRANSLATIONS OF THE STORIES in the present collection have not been published in any book before. They form the first of several volumes of translations into English of Rabindranath Tagore's works which the Visva-Bharati intends to bring out in connection with the Tagore Centenary celebrations to take place in 1961.

Rabindranath wrote short stories at every stage of his life. His first short story *Bhikharini* ('The Beggar Woman') was published in 1877 when he was sixteen, and his last few stories—outlines rather than completed wholes—were written a few months before his death in 1941. The three volumes of *Galpaguchchha*, in which all but the very last few are collected, contain eighty-four of them. Over half this number were written between 1891 and 1895 during his first great creative period, usually referred to as the *Sadhana* period after the monthly magazine of that name of which Rabindranath was for some years the editor. The rest were written at intervals, sometimes of several years. The biggest later group—of seven in 1914 followed by three in 1917—belong to the *Sabuj Patra* period when he was contributing a large part of its matter every month to the magazine of that name edited by that brilliant writer, the late Pramatha Chaudhuri.

Rabindranath Tagore's short stories place him securely among the great masters of the art in the world. They exhibit all the characteristic qualities of his genius—his vivid imagination coupled with a penetrating insight into reality, his wide humanity, his intolerance of wrong and injustice, his matchless constructive ability. They are of interest, moreover, as reflecting his surroundings, the ideas that were dominant and the problems that exercised his mind, at different periods of his life.

Of all his stories Rabindranath liked the earlier ones best. He wrote them when he was managing the family estates and living mostly in the villages—Shilaida, Patisar, Shajadpur and others—of which he gives us such delightful glimpses in his *Chhinna Patra* (Torn Letters). They have, he often asserted, a freshness of feeling and a directness of observation which their rural setting and his own youth gave them. Their nature can be best realized from his account of the origin of one of them ("The Runaway"). In a letter dated June 25, 1895, he writes: "As I sit writing bit by bit a story for the *Sadhana*, the lights and shadows and colours of my surroundings mingle with my words. The scenes and characters and events that I am now imagining have this sun and rain and river and the reeds on the river-bank, this monsoon sky, this shady village, these rain-nourished happy corn-fields to serve as their back-ground and to give them life and reality" And again, in a letter

on the subject written in 1932, he says: "When I came face to face with nature in the villages of Bengal my days overflowed with happiness. That joy runs through these simple unadorned stories."

Rabindranath had watched the drama of the humble lives of the villagers with infinite sympathy and understanding, and in depicting them he has succeeded in investing them with the power to interest and move us deeply. As Edward Thompson puts it: "Much of the living sympathy with the poor which has marked these later years of Bengal's history owes its kindling to the *Galpaguchchha*. As Euripides was charged with making slaves interesting, so those who would stand on ancient ways might charge Rabindranath with making the petty griefs and joys of ryots significant".

Of the stories translated here 'Mahamaya', 'Conclusion', 'Trespass', 'Cloud and Sun', 'The Judge', and 'The Runaway' were published between 1893 and 1895; 'False Hopes' in 1898; 'The Hidden Treasure' in 1907; and 'The Stolen Treasure' in 1933. 'The Stolen Treasure', the concluding story in the final volume of *Galpaguchchha*, is included here to serve as a specimen of Rabindranath's last writings in this form.

S. N. M.

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THE RUNAWAY
AND OTHER STORIES

THE RUNAWAY

MOTI BABU, ZEMINDAR OF KATALIA, was on his way home by boat. There had been the usual forenoon halt, alongside a village mart on the river, and the cooking of the midday meal was in progress.

A Brahmin boy came up to the boat and asked: "Which way are you going, Sir?" He could not have been older than fifteen or sixteen.

"To Katalia," Moti Babu replied.

"Could you give me a lift to Nandigram, on your way?"

Moti Babu acceded and asked the young fellow his name.

"My name is Tara," said the boy.

With his fair complexion, his great big eyes and his delicate, finely-cut, smiling lips, the lad was strikingly handsome. All he had on was a *dhoti*, somewhat the worse for wear, and his bare upper body displayed no superfluity either of clothing or flesh,— its rounded proportions looked like some sculptor's masterpiece.

"My son," said Moti Babu affectionately, "have your bath and come on board. You will dine with me."

"Wait a minute, Sir," said Tara, with which he jumped on the servants' boat moored astern, and set to work to assist in the cooking. Moti Babu's

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servant was an up-country man and it was evident that his ideas of preparing fish for the pot were crude. Tara relieved him of his task and neatly got through it with complete success. He then made up one or two vegetable dishes with a skill which showed a good deal of practice. His work finished, Tara after a plunge in the river took out a fresh *dhoti* from his bundle, clad himself in spotless white, and with a little wooden comb smoothed back his flowing locks from his forehead into a cluster behind his neck. Then, with his sacred thread glistening over his breast, he presented himself before his host.

Moti Babu took him into the cabin where his wife, Annapurna, and their nine-year-old daughter were sitting. The good lady was immensely taken with the comely young fellow; her whole heart went out to him. Where could he be coming from: whose child could he be: ah, poor thing, how could his mother bear to be separated from him?—thought she to herself.

Dinner was duly served and a seat placed for Tara by Moti Babu's side. The boy seemed to have but a poor appetite. Annapurna put it down to bashfulness and repeatedly pressed him to try this and that, but he would not allow himself to be persuaded. He had clearly a will of his own, but he showed it quite simply and naturally without any appearance of wilfulness or obstinacy.

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When they had all finished, Annapurna made Tara sit by her side and questioned him about himself. She was not successful in gathering much of a connected story, but this at least was clear that he had run away from home at the early age of ten or eleven.

"Have you no mother?" asked Annapurna.

"Yes."

"Does she not love you?"

This last question seemed to strike the boy as highly absurd. He laughed as he replied, "Why should she not?"

"Why did you leave her, then?" pursued the mystified lady.

"She has four more boys and three girls."

Annapurna was shocked. "What a thing to say!" she cried. "Can one bear to cut off a finger because there are four more?"

2

Tara's history was as brief as his years were few, but for all that the boy was quite out of the common. He was the fourth son of his parents and had lost his father in his infancy. In spite of this large family of children, Tara had always been the favourite. He was petted alike by his mother, his brothers and sisters, and the neighbours. Even the schoolmaster usually spared him the rod, and when he did not, the punishment was felt by

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all the class. So there was no reason for him to leave his home. But, curiously enough, though the scamp of the village—whose time was divided between eating the fruits stolen from the neighbours' trees and tasting the more plentiful fruits of his stealing pressed on him by these same neighbours—remained within the village bounds clinging to his scolding mother, the pet of the village ran away to join a band of wandering players.

There was a hue and cry, and a rescue party hunted him out and brought him back. His distracted mother strained him to her breast and deluged him with her tears. A stern sense of duty forced his elders to make a heroic effort to administer a mild corrective, but overcome by the reaction they lavished their repentant fondness on him worse than ever. The neighbours' wives redoubled their attentions in the hope of reconciling him to his home life. But all bonds, even those of affection, were irksome to the boy. The star under which he was born must have decreed him homeless.

When Tara saw boats from foreign parts being towed along the river, or a *Sannyasi*, in his wanderings through unknown lands, resting under one of the village trees, or a gypsy camp sprung up on the fallow field by the river, the gypsies seated by their mat-walled huts, splitting bamboos and weaving baskets, his spirit longed for the freedom of the

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mysterious outside world, unhampered by ties of affection. After he had repeated his escapade two or three times, his relations and neighbours gave up all hope of him.

When the proprietor of the band of players, which he had joined, began to love Tara as a son and he became the favourite of the whole party, big and small alike, when he found that even the people of the houses at which their performances were given, chiefly the women, would send for him to mark their special appreciation, he gave them all the slip, and his companions could find no trace of him.

Tara was as impatient of bondage as a young deer, and as susceptible to music. It was the songs in the theatrical performances which had drawn him away from his home ties. Their tunes would make corresponding waves course through his veins and his whole being swayed to their rhythm. Even when he was quite a child, the solemn way in which he would sit out a musical performance, gravely nodding to mark the time, used to make it difficult for the grown-ups to restrain their laughter. Not only music, but the patter of the heavy July rain on the trees in full foliage, the roll of the thunder, the moaning of the wind through the thickets, as of some infant giant strayed from its mother, would make him beside himself. The distant cry of the kites flying high in the blazing midday sky, the croaking of the frogs on a rainy

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evening, the howling of the jackals at dead of night—all these stirred him to his depths.

This passion for music next led him to take up with a company of ballad singers. The master took great pains in teaching him to sing and recite ballads composed in alliterative verse and jingling metre, based on stories from the epics, and became as fond of him as if he were a pet singing bird. But after he had learnt several pieces, one fine morning it was found that the bird had flown.

In this part of the country, during June and July, a succession of fairs are held turn by turn in the different villages, and bands of players and singers and dancing girls, together with hordes of traders of every kind, journey in boats along the big and little rivers from fair to fair. Since the year before a novelty in the shape of a party of acrobats had joined the throng. Tara after leaving the ballad singers had been travelling with a trader, helping him to sell his *pan*. His curiosity being roused, he threw in his lot with the acrobats. He had taught himself to play on the flute, and it was his sole function to play jigs, in the Lucknow style, while the acrobats were doing their feats. It was from this troupe that he had last run away. Tara had heard that the Zemindar of Nandigram was getting up some amateur theatricals on a grand scale. He promptly tied up his belongings into a bundle with the intention of going there, when he came across Moti Babu.

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Tara's imaginative nature had saved him from acquiring the manners of any of the different companies with whom he had hobnobbed. His mind had always remained aloof and free. He had seen and heard many ugly things, but there was no room within him for these to be stored away. Like other bonds, habit also failed to hold him. Swan-like, he swam lightly over the muddy waters of the world, and no matter how often his curiosity impelled him to dive into the mire beneath, his feathers remained unruffled and white. That is why the face of the runaway shone with an unsullied youthfulness which made even the middle-aged, worldly Moti Babu accept and welcome him, unquestioning and undoubting.

After dinner was over, the boat was cast off and Annapurna, with an affectionate interest, went on asking all about Tara's relatives and his home life. The boy made the shortest possible replies and at last sought refuge in flight to the deck.

The vast river outside, swollen by the seasonal rains to the last limit of its brink, seemed to embarrass mother Nature herself by its boisterous recklessness. The sun, shining out of a break in the clouds, touched, as though with a magic wand, the rows of half-submerged reeds at the water's edge, the fresh juicy green of the sugar-cane patches higher up on the bank and the purple haze of the woodlands on the farther shore against the

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distant horizon. Everything was gleaming and thrilling and quickening and speaking with life.

Tara mounted the upper deck and stretched himself under the shade of the spreading sail. One after another, sloping grassy meadows, flooded jute fields, deep green waves of *aman* rice, narrow paths winding up to the village from the riverside, villages nestling amidst their dense groves, came into sight and passed away. This great world, with its wide-gazing sky, with all the stir and whisper in its fields, the tumult in its water, the restless rustle in its trees, the vast remoteness of its space above and below, was on terms of the closest intimacy with the boy, and yet it never, for a moment, tried to bind his restless spirit within a jealously exacting embrace.

Calves were gambolling by the riverside. Hobbled village ponies limped along, grazing on the meadow lands. Kingfishers, perched on the bamboo poles put up for spreading the nets, took a sudden plunge every now and then after fish. Boys were playing pranks in the river. Village maids up to their breasts in the water chattered and laughed as they scrubbed their clothes. Fishwives with baskets, their cloth tucked round their waist, bargained with the fishermen over their catch.—These everyday scenes never seemed to exhaust their novelty for Tara ; his eyes could never quench their thirst.

Then Tara started to talk with the boatmen. He jumped up and took turns with them at the

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poles whenever the boat hugged the shore too closely. And when the steersman felt he would like a smoke Tara relieved him at the helm, and seemed to know exactly how to work the sail with the changing direction of the breeze and the boat.

A little before evening Annapurna sent for Tara inside and asked him: "What do you usually have for supper?"

"Whatever I get," was the reply, "and some days I don't get anything at all!"

Annapurna was not a little disappointed at this lack of response. She felt she would like to feed and clothe and care for this homeless waif till he was made thoroughly happy, but somehow she could not find out what would please him. When a little later, the boat was moored for the night, she bustled about and sent out servants into the village to get milk and sweetmeats and whatever other dainties were to be had. But Tara contented himself with a very sparing supper and refused the milk altogether. Even Moti Babu, a man of few words, tried to press the milk on him, but he simply said: "I don't care for it."

Thus passed two or three days of their life on the river. Tara of his own accord, and with great alacrity, helped in the marketing and the cooking and lent a hand with the boatmen in whatever had to be done. Anything worth seeing never escaped his keen glance. His eyes, his limbs, his mind were always on the alert. Like Nature herself, he

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was in constant activity, yet aloof and undistracted. Every individual has his own fixed standpoint, but Tara was just a joyous ripple on the rushing current of things across the infinite blue. Nothing bound him to past or future, his part was simply to flow onwards.

From the various professionals with whom he had associated he had picked up many entertaining accomplishments. Free from all troubling thoughts, his mind had a wonderful receptivity. He had by heart any number of ballads and songs and long passages out of the dramas. One day, as was his custom, Moti Babu was giving a reading from the Ramayana to his wife and daughter. He was about to come to the story of Kusha and Lava, the valiant sons of Rama, when Tara could contain his excitement no longer. Stepping down from the deck into the cabin he exclaimed: "Put away the book, Sir. Let me sing you the story." He then began to recite Dasarathi's version of the story in a voice full and sweet as a flute's, showering and scattering its rhymes and alliterations all over. The atmosphere became charged with a wealth of laughter and tears. The boatmen hung round the cabin doors to listen, and even the occupants of passing boats strained their ears to get snatches of the floating melody. When it came to an end, a sigh went forth from all the listeners,—alas, that it should have finished so soon!

Annapurna with her eyes brimming over, longed

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to take Tara into her lap and fold him to her bosom. Moti Babu thought that if only he could persuade the lad to stay on with them he would cease to feel the want of a son. Only the little Charu, their daughter, felt as if she would burst with jealousy and hatred.

3

Charu was the only child of her parents, the sole claimant to their love. There was no end to her whims and caprices. She had ideas of her own as to dress and toilet, but these were liable to constant fluctuations. So whenever she was invited out, her mother was on tenter-hooks till the last moment, lest she should get something impossible into her head. If once she did not fancy the way her hair had been done, no amount of taking it down and doing it up again would be any good—the matter was sure to end in a fit of sulks. It was the same with most other things. When, however, she was in a good humour, she was reasonableness itself. She would then kiss and embrace her mother with gushing affection, and distract her with incessant prattle and laughter. In a word, this little mite of a girl was an impossible enigma.

With all the fierceness of her untamed heart Charu began to hate Tara. She took to tearfully pushing away her platter at dinner, the cooking was done so badly! She slapped her maid, finding

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fault with her for no rhyme or reason. In fine she succeeded in making her parents thoroughly uncomfortable. The more interesting she, with the others, found Tara's varied accomplishments to be and, since her mind refused to admit Tara's merits, the more he gave proof of those merits, the angrier she became.

When Tara first sang the story of Kusha and Lava, Annapurna had hoped that the music, which could have charmed the beasts of the forests, might serve to soften the temper of her wayward daughter. She asked her: "And how did you like it, Charu?" A vigorous shaking of the head was all the reply she got, which translated into words must have meant: "I did not like it, and I never will like it, so there!"

Divining that it was a pure case of jealousy the mother gave up showing any attention to Tara in her daughter's presence. But when after her early supper Charu had gone off to bed, and Moti Babu was sitting out on deck with Tara, Annapurna took her seat near the cabin door and asked Tara to give them a song. As the melody flooded the evening sky, seeming to enrapture into a hush the villages reposing under the dusk, and filling Annapurna's tender heart with an ecstasy of unutterable love and beauty, Charu left her bed and came up sobbing: "What a noise you are all making, mother! I can't get a wink of sleep!" How could she bear the idea of being sent off to bed alone,

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and all of them hanging round Tara, revelling in his singing?

Tara, for his part, found the tantrums of this little girl, with the bright black eyes, highly diverting. He tried his best to win her over by telling her stories, singing songs to her, playing on the flute for her, but with no success. Only when he plunged into the river for his daily swim, with his *dhoti* lifted short above his knees and tightened round his waist, his fair supple limbs cleaving the water with skilful ease, like some water-sprite at play, her curious gaze could not help being attracted. She would be looking forward every morning to his bath-time, but without letting any one guess her fascination. And when the time came, this little untaught actress would take up her knitting of a woollen scarf by the cabin window with a world of attention; only now and again her eyes would be raised to throw a casual, seemingly contemptuous glance at Tara's performance.

They had long passed by Nandigram, but of this Tara had taken no notice. The big boat swept onwards with a leisurely movement, sometimes under sail, sometimes towed along, through river, tributary and branch. The days of its inmates wore on like these streams, with a lazy flow of unexciting hours of mild variedness. No one was in any kind of hurry. They all took plenty of time over their daily bath and food, and even before it grew quite dark the boats would be moored near

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the landing place of some village of sufficient size, against a woodland background lively with the sparkle of fireflies and the chirping of cicadas. In this way it took them over ten days to get to Katalia.

4

On the news of the Zemindar Babu's arrival, men, palanquins and ponies were sent out to meet his boat, and the retainers fired off a salvo startling the village crows into noisy misgivings. Impatient of the delay occasioned by this formal welcome, Tara quietly slipped off the boat by himself, and made a rapid round of the village. Some he hailed as brother or sister, others as uncle or aunt, and in the short space of two or three hours he had made friends with all sorts and conditions of people.

It was perhaps because Tara acknowledged no bonds that he could win his way so easily into others' affections. Anyhow, in a few days the whole village had capitulated unconditionally. One of the reasons for his easy victory was the quickness with which he could enter into the spirit of every class, as if he was one of themselves. He was not the slave of any habit, but he could easily and simply get used to things. With children, he was just a child, yet aloof and superior. With his elders, he was not childish, but neither was he a prig. With the peasant, he was a peasant without losing his brahminhood. He took part in the work or play of

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all of them with zest and skill. One day as he was seated at a sweetmeat-seller's, the latter begged him to mind the shop while he went on some errand, and the boy cheerfully sat there for hours, driving off the flies with a palmyra leaf. He had some knowledge of how to make sweetmeats ; and could also take a hand at the loom or at the potter's wheel with equal ease.

But though he had made a conquest of the village, he had been unable to overcome the jealousy of one little girl ; and it may be that just because he felt that this atom of femininity desired his banishment with all her might, he made such a prolonged stay in Katalia.

But little Charu was not long in furnishing fresh proof of the inscrutability of the feminine mind. Sonamani, the daughter of the cook, had been widowed at the early age of five. She was now of Charu's age and her closest friend. She was confined to her quarters with some ailment when the family returned home and so could not come to see her companion for some days. When at last she did turn up, the two bosom friends nearly fell out for good. This is how it happened.

Charu had started on the story of her travels with great circumstance. With the thrilling episode of the abduction of the gem known as Tara, she had fully expected to raise her friend's curiosity and wonderment to the topmost pitch. But when she learned that Tara was not unknown to Sonamani,

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that he called Sonamani's mother aunt, and Sonamani called him *dada*; when she further gathered that Tara had not only charmed both mother and daughter by playing *kirtan* tunes on the flute, but had actually made a bamboo flute for Sonamani with his own hand, and plucked fruit for her from tree tops and flowers for her from brambly thickets—she felt as if a red-hot spear had been thrust into her.

That very day, Charu, on some different pretext, vowed eternal enmity to Sonamani. And going into Tara's room she pulled out his favourite flute, threw it on the floor and kicked and stamped and trampled it into shivers.

While she was thus furiously busy Tara came into the room. The picture of passion which the girl presented amazed him. "Charu!" he cried. "Why are you smashing up my flute?"

"Serve you right. I'd do it again!" she screamed, as with flushed face and reddened eyes she gave the flute some more superfluous kicks and then ran away crying from the room.

Tara picked up his flute to find it utterly done for. He could not help laughing out loud to think of the sudden fate which had overtaken his unoffending instrument. Charu was becoming for him more and more an object of curiosity as the days went by.

He found in this house other objects, also, which gave full scope to his curiosity. These were the English picture books in Moti Babu's library.

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Though his knowledge of the outside world was considerable, he found it difficult to enter fully into this world of pictures. He tried to make up for the deficiency by dint of his imagination. But that did not prove wholly satisfactory.

Finding the picture books so greatly attracting Tara, Moti Babu one day asked him: "Would you like to learn English? You could then understand all about these pictures."

"I would indeed!" exclaimed Tara.

Moti Babu, highly delighted, at once arranged with the head master of the village school to give him English lessons.

5

With his keen memory and undivided attention, Tara set to work at his English lessons. He seemed to have embarked on some adventurous quest and left all his old life behind. The neighbours saw no more of him, and when in the afternoon, just before it got dark, he would pace rapidly up and down the deserted riverside, getting up his lessons, his devoted band of boys looked on dejectedly from a distance, not daring to interrupt him.

Even Charu but rarely came across him. Tara used to come into the *zenana* for his meals, of which he partook leisurely, under the kindly eyes of Annapurna. Now he could no longer brook the loss of time over all this, and begged Moti Babu's permission to be served in his room outside.

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Annapurna was grieved at the prospect of losing his company, and protested. But Moti Babu, glad to find the boy so mindful of his studies, fell in with the idea and so arranged it.

All of a sudden Charu announced that she also must and would learn English. Her parents at first took it as a great joke and laughed heartily over their little one's latest caprice. But she effectually washed away the humorous part of the proposal with a flood of tears ; and her helplessly doting guardians had to take the matter seriously. Charu was placed under the same tutor and had her lessons with Tara.

But studiousness did not come naturally to this flighty little creature. She not only did not learn herself, but made it difficult for Tara to do so either. She would lag behind by not preparing her lessons, but would fly into a rage, or burst into tears, if Tara went on to the next one without her. When Tara was through with one book and had to get another, the same had to be procured for her also. Her jealousy would not allow her to put up with Tara's way of sitting alone in his room to do his exercises. She took to stealing in, when he was not there, and daubing his exercise book with ink, or making away with his pen. Tara would bear these depredations as long as he could, and when he could not he would chastize her, but she could not be got to mend her ways.

At last, by accident, Tara hit upon an effective method. One day, as he had torn out an ink-

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bespattered page from his exercise book and was sitting there thoroughly vexed about it, Charu peeped in. "Now I am going to catch it," thought she. But as she came in, her hopes were disappointed. Tara sat quiet, without a word. She flitted in and out, sometimes edging near enough for him to give her a smack, if he had been so minded. But no, he remained as still and grave as ever. The little culprit was at her wit's end. She had never been used to begging pardon, and yet her penitent heart yearned to make it up. Finding no other way out, she took up the torn-out page and sitting near him wrote on it in a large round hand: "I will never do it again." She then went through a variety of manoeuvres to draw Tara's attention to what she had written. Tara could keep his countenance no longer, and burst out laughing. The girl fled from the room beside herself with grief and anger. She felt that nothing short of the complete obliteration of that sheet of paper, from eternal time and infinite space, would serve to wipe away her mortification!

Bashful, shrinking Sonamani would sometimes come round to the schoolroom door, hesitate at the threshold and then take herself off. She had made it up with Charu, and they were as great friends as ever in all else, but where Tara was concerned Sonamani was afraid and cautious. So she usually chose the time when Charu was inside the *zenana*, to hover near the schoolroom door. One day Tara

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caught sight of the retreating figure and called out: "Hullo, Sona, is that you? What's the news: how is Aunt?"

"You haven't been to us for so long," said Sonamani. "Mother has a pain in the back or she would have come to see you herself."

At this point Charu came up. Sonamani was all in a flutter. She felt as if she had been caught stealing her friend's property. Charu, with a toss of her head, and her voice pitched shrill, cried out: "For shame, Sonamani! To be coming and disturbing lessons! I'll tell mother." To hear Tara's self-constituted guardian, one would have thought that her sole care in life was to prevent the disturbance of his studies! What brought her here at this time the Lord might have known, but Tara had no idea.

Poor, flustered Sonamani sought refuge in making up all kinds of excuses, whereupon Charu called her a nasty little story-teller and she had to slink away, owning complete defeat.

But the sympathetic Tara shouted after her: "All right, Sona, tell your mother I'll go and see her this evening."

"Oh! Will you?" sneered Charu. "Haven't you got lessons to do? I'll tell *Master-mashai*, you see if I don't!"

Undeterred by the threat, Tara went over to dame cook's quarters one or two evenings. On the third, Charu went one better than mere threatening. She fastened the chain outside Tara's door and, taking

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a small padlock off her mother's spice-box, locked him in for the evening, only letting him out when it was supper time. Tara was excessively annoyed and swore he would not touch a morsel of food. The repentant girl, beside herself, begged and prayed for forgiveness. "I'll never, never do it again," she pleaded, "I beg of you at your feet, do please have something to eat." Tara was at first obdurate, but when she began to sob as if her heart would break, he had to turn back and sit down to his supper.

Charu had often and often said to herself that she would never again tease Tara and be very, very good to him, but Sonamani, or something or other, would get in the way and spoil her virtuous resolution.

And it came about that whenever Tara found her particularly quiet and good he began to look out for an explosion. How or why it happened he never could make out, but there it was sure enough, a regular storm, followed by showers of tears, and then the bright sun shone out and there was peace.

6

Thus passed two whole years. Tara had never before permitted any one to cage him for so long. Perhaps it was his attraction for the novelty of his studies ; perhaps it was a change of character, due to growth in years, which made his restless spirit

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welcome the change to a restful life ; perhaps, again, his pretty little fellow-student, with her endless variety of teasing ways, had cast a secret spell over his heart.

Charu had reached her marriageable age. Moti Babu was anxiously casting about for a suitable bridegroom. But the mother said to her husband : "Why are you hunting for bridegrooms, high and low? Tara is quite a nice boy, and our daughter is fond of him, too."

The proposal took Moti Babu by surprise. "How can that be?" he exclaimed. "We know nothing of his family or antecedents. Our only daughter must make a good match."

One day a party came over from the Raydanga Zemindar's to see the girl with a view to make a proposal. An attempt was made to get Charu dressed up and taken to the reception room outside. But she locked herself in her bedroom and refused to stir out. Moti Babu stood by the door and pleaded and scolded in vain ; at last he had to return outside and make feeble excuses to the would-be bridegroom's party, saying his daughter was indisposed. They came to the conclusion that there was something wrong with the girl which was sought to be concealed, and the matter fell through.

Then Moti Babu's thoughts came back to Tara. He was handsome and well-behaved, and in every way desirable. He could continue to live with them, and so the wrench of sending away their only child

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to another's house could be avoided. It also struck him that the wilful ways of his little one, which seemed so readily excusable in her father's home, would not be so indulgently tolerated in that of her husband.

The husband and wife had a long talk about it and finally decided to send over to Tara's village in order to make inquiries. When the news was brought back that the family was respectable enough, but poor, a formal proposal was at once sent off to the mother and the elders. And they, overjoyed at the prospect, lost no time in signifying their consent.

Moti Babu discussed and settled the time and place of the wedding with his wife alone ; with his habitual reticence and caution he kept the matter secret from everybody else.

Meanwhile Charu would now and then make stormy raids on the schoolroom outside, sometimes angry, sometimes affectionate, sometimes contemptuous, but always disturbing. And gleams, as of lightning flashes, would create a hitherto unknown tumult in the once free and open sky of the boy's mind. His unburdened life now felt the obstruction of some network of dreamstuff into which it had drifted and become entangled. Some days Tara would leave aside his lessons and betake himself to the library, where he would remain immersed in the pictures. And the world, which his imagination now conjured up out of these, was

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different from the former one and far more intensely coloured. The boy was struck with this change in himself, and conscious of a new experience.

Moti Babu had fixed upon a day in July for the auspicious ceremony, and sent out invitations accordingly to Tara's mother and relatives. He also instructed his agent in Calcutta to send down a brass band and the other innumerable paraphernalia necessary for a wedding. But to Tara, he had not as yet said a word about the matter.

In the meantime the monsoon had set in. The river had almost dried up, the only sign of water being the pools left in the hollows ; elsewhere the river bed was deeply scored with the tracks of the carts which had latterly been crossing over. The village boats, stranded high and dry, were half imbedded in the caking mud. Then all of a sudden one day, like a married daughter returning to her father's house, a swift-flowing current, babbling and laughing with glee, danced straight into the empty heart and outstretched arms of the village. The boys and girls romped about with joy and never seemed to get done with their sporting and splashing in the water, embracing their long lost friend. The village women left their tasks and came out to greet their boon companion of old. And everywhere fresh life was stirred up in the dry, languishing village.

Boats from distant parts, small and big, and of all varieties of shape, bringing their freight, began to be seen on the river, and the bazars in the evening

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resounded with the songs of the foreign boatmen. During the dry season, the villages on either bank were left in their secluded corners to while away the time with their domestic concerns, and then in the rains the great outside World would come a-wooing, mounted on his silt-red chariot, laden with presents of merchandise, and all pettiness would be swept away for a time in the glamour of the courting; all would be life and gaiety, and festive clamour would fill the skies.

This year the Nag Zemindars, close by, were getting up a specially gorgeous car-festival, and there was to be a grand fair. When, in the moon-lit evening, Tara went sauntering by the river, he saw boat upon boat hurrying by, some filled with merry-go-rounds, others bearing theatrical parties, singing and playing as they went, and any number carrying traders and their wares. There was one containing a party of strolling players, with a violin vigorously playing a well known tune, and the usual *ha! ha!* of encouragement boisterously shouted out every time it came back to the refrain. The up-country boatmen of the cargo boats kept up an unmeaning but enthusiastic din with their cymbals, without any accompanying song or tune. All was excitement and bustle.

And as Tara looked on, an immense mass of cloud rolled up from the horizon, spreading and bellying out like a great black sail; the moon was overcast; the east wind sprang up driving along

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cloud after cloud ; the river swelled and heaved. In the swaying woods on the river banks the darkness grew tense, frogs croaked and shrill cicadas seemed to be sawing away at the night with their chirp.

All the world was holding a car-festival that evening, with flags flying, wheels whirling and the earth rumbling. Clouds pursued each other, the wind rushed after them, the boats sped on, and songs leapt to the skies. Then, the lightning flashed out, rending the sky from end to end ; the thunder crackled forth ; and out of the depths of the darkness came a scent of moist earth and torrential rain to fill the air. Only the sleepy little village of Katalia dozed away in its corner, with doors closed and lights out.

Next day, Tara's mother and brothers disembarked at Katalia and three big boats full of the various requirements of the wedding touched at the Zemindar's landing *ghat*. Next day, Sonamani in great trepidation ventured to take some preserves and pickles to Tara's room and stood hesitating at his door. But there was no Tara to be seen. Before the conspiracy of love and affection had succeeded in completely hemming him in, the unattached, free-souled Brahmin boy had fled in the rainy night, with the heart of the village which he had stolen, back to the arms of his great world-mother, placid in her serene unconcern.

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IT WAS A MOONLESS NIGHT, and Mrityunjaya was seated before the ancestral image of the goddess Kali. As he finished his devotions the cawing of an early morning crow was heard from a neighbouring mango grove.

First seeing that the door of the temple was shut, he bowed once more before the image and, shifting its pedestal, took from under it a strong wooden box. This he opened with a key which hung on his sacred thread, but the moment he had looked inside he started in dismay. He took up the box and shook it several times. It had not been broken open, for the lock was uninjured. He groped all round the image a dozen times, but could find nothing.

Mrityunjaya's little temple stood on one side of his inner garden which was surrounded by a wall. It was sheltered by the shade of some tall trees. Inside there was nothing but the image of Kali, and it had only one entrance. Like a mad man Mrityunjaya threw open the door, and began to roam round on all sides in search of a clue, but in vain. By this time daylight had come. In despair he sat on some steps and with his head buried in his hands began to think. He was just beginning to feel sleepy after his long sleepless night when

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suddenly he heard some one say: "Greeting, my son!" Looking up he saw in the courtyard before him a long-haired sannyasi. Mrityunjaya made a deep obeisance to him and the ascetic placed his hand on his head, saying: "My son, your sorrow is vain."

Mrityunjaya, in astonishment, replied: "Can you read people's thoughts? How do you know about my sorrow? I have spoken of it to no one."

The sannyasi answered: "My son, instead of sorrowing over what you have lost, you ought to rejoice."

Clasping his feet Mrityunjaya exclaimed: "Then you know everything? Tell me how it got lost and where I can recover it."

The sannyasi replied: "If I wanted you to suffer misfortune then I would tell you. But you must not grieve over that which the goddess has taken from you out of pity."

But Mrityunjaya was not satisfied and in the hope of pleasing his visitor he spent the whole of that day serving him in different ways. But when early next morning he was bringing him a bowl of fresh milk from his own cow he found that the sannyasi had disappeared.

2

When Mrityunjaya had been a child his grandfather, Harihar, was sitting one day on those same

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steps of the temple, smoking his *hookah*, when a sannyasi came into the courtyard and greeted him. Harihar invited him into his home and for several days treated him as an honoured guest.

When about to go the sannyasi said to him: "My son, you are poor, are you not?", to which Harihar replied: "Father, I am indeed. Only hear what my condition is. Once our family was the most prosperous in the village, but now our condition is so miserable that we can hardly hold up our heads. I beg you to tell me how we can restore ourselves to prosperity again."

The sannyasi laughing slightly said: "My son, why not be satisfied with your present position? What's the use of trying to become wealthy?"

But Harihar persisted and declared that he was ready to undertake anything that would restore his family to their proper rank in society.

Thereupon the sannyasi took out a roll of cloth in which an old and stained piece of paper was wrapped. It looked like a horoscope. The sannyasi unrolled it and Harihar saw that it had some signs in cypher written within circles, and below these was a lot of doggerel verse which commenced thus:

*For attainment of your goal
Find a word that rhymes with soul.
From the 'Râdhâ' take its 'dhâ',
After that at last put 'râ'.*

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*From the tamarind-banyan's mouth
Turn your face towards the south.
When the light is in the East
There shall be of wealth a feast.*

There was much more of the same kind of rigmarole.

Harihar said: "Father, I can't understand a single word of it."

To this the sannyasi replied: "Keep it by you. Make your *pujah* to the goddess Kali, and by her grace you, or some descendant of yours, will gain the untold wealth of which this writing tells the secret hiding place."

Harihar entreated him to explain the writing, but the sannyasi said that only by the practice of austerity could its meaning be discovered.

Just at this moment Harihar's youngest brother, Shankar, arrived on the scene and Harihar tried to snatch the paper away before it could be observed. But the sannyasi, laughing, said: "Already, I see, you have started on the painful road to greatness. But you need not be afraid. The secret can only be discovered by one person. If anyone else tries a thousand times he will never be able to solve it. It will be a member of your family, so you can show this paper to anyone without fear."

The sannyasi having left them, Harihar could not rest until he had hidden the paper. Fearful lest

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anyone else should profit by it, and above all lest his young brother Shankar should enjoy this hidden wealth, he locked the paper in a strong wooden box and hid it under the seat of the household goddess Kali. Every month, at the time of the new moon, he would go in the dead of night to the temple and there he would offer prayers to the goddess in the hope that she would give him the power to decipher the secret writing.

Some time after this Shankar came to his brother and begged him to show him the paper.

"Go away, you idiot!" shouted Harihar, "that paper was nothing. That rascal of a sannyasi wrote a lot of nonsense on it simply to deceive me. I burnt it long ago."

Shankar remained silent, but some weeks afterwards he disappeared from the house and was never seen again.

From that time Harihar gave up all other occupations, and spent all his waking moments in thinking about the hidden treasure.

When he died he left this mysterious paper to his eldest son, Shyamapada, who, as soon as he got possession of it, gave up his business and spent his whole time in studying the secret cypher and in worshipping the goddess in the hope of goodluck coming to him.

Mrityunjaya was Shyamapada's eldest child, so he became the owner of this precious heirloom on his father's death. The worse his condition became the

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greater the eagerness he showed in trying to solve the secret. It was about this time that the loss of the paper occurred. The visit of the long-haired sannyasi coinciding with its disappearance, Mrityunjaya determined that he would try to find him, feeling sure he could discover everything from him. So he left his home on the quest.

3

After spending a year in going from place to place Mrityunjaya one day arrived at a village named Dharagole. There he stayed at a grocer's shop, and as he was sitting absent-mindedly smoking and thinking, a sannyasi passed along the edge of a neighbouring field. At first Mrityunjaya did not pay much attention, but after a few minutes he came to himself and it flashed across his mind that that was the very sannyasi for whom he had been searching. Hurriedly laying aside his *hookah* he rushed past the startled storekeeper and dashed from the shop into the street. But the sannyasi was nowhere to be seen.

As it was dark and the place was strange to him he gave up the idea of searching further and returned to the shop. There he asked the storekeeper what lay beyond the village in the great forest near by. The man replied :

"Once a great city was there, but owing to the curse of the sage Agastya, its king and all his

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subjects died of some dreadful pestilence. People say that enormous wealth and piles of jewels are still hidden there, but no one dares to enter that forest even at midday. Those who have done so have never returned."

Mrityunjaya's mind became restless, and all night long he lay on his mat tormented by mosquitoes and by thoughts of the forest, the sannyasi, and his lost secret. He had read the verses so often that he could almost repeat them by heart, and hour after hour the opening lines kept ringing through his mind, until his brain reeled:

*For attainment of your goal
Find a word that rhymes with soul.
From the 'Râdhâ' take its 'dhâ',
After that at last put 'râ'.*

He could not get the words out of his head. At last when dawn came he fell asleep and in a dream the meaning of the verse became as clear as daylight. Taking the 'dhâ' from 'Râdhâ' and at the end of that putting 'râ' you get 'Dhârâ', and 'gole' rhymes with soul! The name of the village in which he was staying was 'Dhârâgole! He jumped up from his mat sure that he was at last near the end of his search.

4

The whole of that day Mrityunjaya spent roaming about the forest in the hope of finding a path.

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He returned to the village at night half dead with hunger and fatigue, but next day he took a bundle of parched rice and started off again. At midday he arrived at the side of a lake round which there were traces of a path. The water was clear in the middle but near the banks it was a tangle of weeds and water lilies. Having soaked his rice in the water by some broken stone steps on the bank he finished eating it and began to walk slowly round the lake looking carefully everywhere for signs of buildings. Suddenly when he had reached the west side of the lake he stood stock still, for there before him was a tamarind tree growing right in the centre of a gigantic banyan. He immediately recalled the lines:

*From the tamarind-banyan's mouth
Turn your face towards the south.*

After walking some distance towards the south he found himself in the middle of a thick jungle through which it was impossible to force a way. He however determined not to lose sight of the tamarind tree.

Turning back he noticed in the distance through the branches of the tree the pinnacles of a building. Making his way in that direction he came upon a ruined temple, by the side of which were the ashes of a recent fire. With great caution Mrityunjaya made his way to a broken door and peeped in. There

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was no one there, not even an image, only a blanket, and a water pot with a sannyasi's scarf lying beside it.

Evening was approaching, the village was far off, and it would be difficult to find a path back by night, so Mrityunjaya was pleased at seeing signs of a human being. By the door lay a large piece of stone which had fallen from the ruin. On this he seated himself and was deep in thought when he suddenly noticed what appeared to be written characters on the surface of the stone. Looking closely he saw a circular symbol which was familiar to him. It was partly obliterated, it is true, but it was sufficiently distinct for him to recognize the design as that which had appeared at the top of his lost piece of paper. He had studied it so often that it was clearly printed on his brain. How many times had he begged the goddess to reveal to him the meaning of that mystic sign as he sat at midnight in the dimly lit temple of his home with the fragrance of incense filling the night air. To-night the fulfilment of his long cherished desire seemed so near that his whole body trembled. Fearing that by some slight blunder he might frustrate all his hopes, and above all dreading lest the sannyasi had been beforehand in discovering his treasure he shook with terror. He could not decide what to do. The thought came to him that he might even at that very moment be sitting above untold wealth without knowing it.

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As he sat repeating the name of Kali evening fell and the sombre darkness of the forest resounded with the continual chirping of crickets.

5

Just as he was wondering what to do he saw through the thick foliage the distant gleam of a fire. Getting up from the stone on which he was seated he carefully marked the spot he was leaving and went off in the direction of the light.

Having progressed with great difficulty a short way he saw from behind the trunk of a tree the very sannyasi he had been seeking with the well known paper in his hand. He had opened it and, by the light of the flames, he was working out its meaning in the ashes with a stick.

There was the very paper which belonged to Mrityunjaya, and which had belonged to his father and his grandfather before him, in the hands of a thief and a cheat! It was for this then that this rogue of a sannyasi had bidden Mrityunjaya not to sorrow over his loss!

The sannyasi was calculating the meaning of the signs, and every now and then would measure certain distances on the ground with a stick. Sometimes he would stop and shake his head with a disappointed air, and then he would go back and make fresh calculations.

In this way the night was nearly spent and it was

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not until the cool breeze of daybreak began to rustle in the leafy branches of the trees that the sannyasi folded up the paper and went away.

Mrityunjaya was perplexed. He was quite sure that without the sannyasi's help it would be impossible for him to decipher the mystery of the paper. But he was equally certain that the covetous rascal would not knowingly assist him. Therefore to watch the sannyasi secretly was his only hope ; but as he could not get any food without going back to the village, Mrityunjaya decided he would return to his lodgings that morning.

When it became light enough he left the tree behind which he had been hiding and made his way to the place where the sannyasi had been making his calculations in the ashes. But he could make nothing of the marks. Nor, after wandering all round, could he see that the forest there differed in any way from other parts of the jungle.

As the sunlight began to penetrate the thick shade of the trees Mrityunjaya made his way towards the village, looking carefully on every side as he went. His chief fear was lest the sannyasi should catch sight of him.

That morning a feast was given to Brahmins at the shop where Mrityunjaya had taken shelter, so he came in for a sumptuous meal. Having fasted so long he could not resist eating heavily, and after the feast he soon rolled over on his mat and fell sound asleep.

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Although he had not slept all night, Mrityunjaya had made up his mind that he would that day take his meals in good time and start off early in the afternoon. What happened was exactly the opposite, for when he woke the sun had already set. But although it was getting dark, he could not refrain from entering the forest.

Night fell suddenly and so dense was the darkness that it was impossible for him to see his way through the deep shadows of the thick jungle. He could not make out which way he was going and when day broke he found that he had been going round and round in one part of the forest quite near the village.

The raucous cawing of some crows from near by sounded to Mrityunjaya like mockery.

6

After many miscalculations and corrections the sannyasi had at length discovered the path to the entrance of a subterranean tunnel. Lighting a torch he entered. The brick walls were mouldy with moss and slime, and water oozed out from the many cracks. In some places sleeping toads could be seen piled up in heaps. After proceeding over slippery stones for some distance the sannyasi came to a wall. The passage was blocked! He struck the wall in several places with a heavy iron bar but there was not the least suspicion of a

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hollow sound. There was not a crack anywhere ; without a doubt the tunnel ended there.

He spent the whole of that night studying the paper again, and next morning having finished his calculations, he entered the underground passage once more. This time, carefully following the secret directions, he loosened a stone from a certain place and discovered a branch turning. This he followed, but once more he came to a stop where another wall blocked all further progress.

But finally, on the fifth night, the sannyasi as he entered exclaimed: "To-night I shall find the way without the shadow of a doubt!"

The passage was like a labyrinth. There seemed no end to its branches and turnings. In some places it was so low and narrow that he had to crawl on hands and knees. Carefully holding the torch he arrived at length at a large circular room, in the middle of which was a wide well of solid masonry. By the light of his torch the sannyasi was unable to see how deep it was, but he saw that from the roof there descended into it a thick heavy iron chain. He pulled with all his strength at this chain and it shook very slightly. But there rose from the depth of the well a metallic clang which reverberated through that dark dismal chamber. The sannyasi called out in excitement: "At last I have found it!"

Next moment a huge stone rolled through the hole in the broken wall through which he had

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entered and someone fell on the floor with a loud cry. Startled by this sudden sound the sannyasi let his torch fall to the ground and the room was plunged in darkness.

7

He called out "Who is there?" but there was no answer. Putting out his hand he touched a man's body. Shaking it he asked, "Who are you?" Still he got no reply. The man was unconscious.

Striking a flint he at last found his torch and lighted it. In the meantime the man had regained consciousness and was trying to sit up though he was groaning with pain.

On seeing him the sannyasi exclaimed: "Why, it is Mrityunjaya! What are you doing here?"

Mrityunjaya replied: "Father, pardon me. God has punished me enough. I was trying to roll that stone on you when my foot slipped and I fell. My leg must be broken."

To this the sannyasi answered: "But what good would it have done you to kill me?"

Mrityunjaya exclaimed: "What good indeed! Why did you steal into my temple and rob me of that secret paper? And what are you doing in this underground place yourself? You are a thief, and a cheat! The sannyasi who gave that paper to my grandfather told him that one of his family was to discover the secret of the writing. The secret is mine by rights, and it is for this reason that I have

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been following you day and night like your shadow, going without food and sleep all these days. Then to-day when you exclaimed 'At last I have found it!' I could restrain myself no longer. I had followed you and was hiding behind the wall where you had made the hole, and I tried to kill you. I failed because I am weak and the ground was slippery and I fell. Kill me if you wish, then I can become a guardian spirit to watch over this treasure of mine. But if I live, you will never be able to take it. Never! Never! Never! If you try, I will bring the curse of a Brahmin on you by jumping into this well and committing suicide. Never will you be able to enjoy this treasure. My father, and his father before him, thought of nothing but this treasure and they died thinking of it. We have become poor for its sake. In search of it I have left wife and children, and without food or sleep have wandered from place to place like a maniac. Never shall you take this treasure from me while I have eyes to see!"

8

The sannyasi said quietly: "Mrityunjaya, listen to me. I will tell you everything. You remember that your grandfather's youngest brother was called Shankar?"

"Yes," replied Mrityunjaya, "he left home and was never heard of again."

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"Well," said the sannyasi, "I am that Shankar!"

Mrityunjaya gave a gasp of despair. He had so long regarded himself as the sole owner of this hidden wealth that, now that this relative had turned up and proved his equal right, he felt as if his claim were destroyed.

Shankar continued: "From the moment that my brother got that paper from the sannyasi he tried every means in his power to keep it hidden from me. But the harder he tried the greater became my curiosity, and I soon found that he had hidden it in a wooden box under the seat of the goddess. I got hold of a duplicate key, and by degrees, whenever the opportunity occurred, I copied out the whole of the writing and the signs. The very day I had finished copying it I left home in quest of the treasure. I even left my wife and only child neither of whom is now living. There is no need to describe all the places I visited in my wanderings. I felt sure that as the paper had been given to my brother by a sannyasi I would be able to find out its meaning from one, so I began to serve sannyasis whenever I had the chance. Many of them were impostors and tried to steal the writing from me. In this way many years passed, but not for a single moment did I have any peace or happiness.

"At last in my search, by virtue of some right action in a previous birth, I had the good fortune to meet in the mountains Swami Rupananda. He

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said to me: 'My child, give up desire, and the imperishable wealth of the whole universe will be yours.'

"He cooled the fever of my mind. By his grace the light of the sky and the green verdure of the earth seemed to me equal to the wealth of kings. One winter day at the foot of the mountain I lit a fire in the brazier of my revered *Guru* and offered up the paper in its flames. The Swami laughed slightly as I did it. At the time I did not understand that laugh. But now I do. Doubtless he thought it is easy enough to burn a piece of paper, but to burn to ashes our desires is not so simple!

"When not a vestige of the paper remained it seemed as if my heart had suddenly filled with the rare joy of freedom. My mind at last realized the meaning of detachment. I said to myself, 'Now I have no more fear, I desire nothing in the world.'

"Shortly after this I parted from the Swami and although I have often sought for him since, I have never seen him again.

"I then wandered as a sannyasi with my mind detached from worldly things. Many years passed and I had almost forgotten the existence of the paper, when one day I came to the forest near Dharagole and took shelter in a ruined temple. After a day or two I noticed that there were inscriptions on the walls, some of which I recognized. There could be no doubt that here was a clue to what I had spent so many years of my life

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in trying to discover. I said to myself: 'I must not stay here. I must leave this forest.'

"But I did not go. I thought there was no harm in staying to see what I could find out, just to satisfy my curiosity. I examined the signs carefully, but without result. I kept thinking of the paper I had burnt. Why had I destroyed it? What harm would there have been in keeping it?

"At last I went back to the village of my birth. On seeing the miserable condition of my ancestral home I thought to myself: 'I am a sannyasi, I have no need of wealth for myself, but these poor people have a home to keep up. There can be no sin in recovering the hidden treasure for their benefit.'

"I knew where the paper was, so it was not difficult for me to steal it.

"For a whole year since then I have been living in this lonely forest searching for the clue. I could think of nothing else. The oftener I was thwarted the greater did my eagerness become. I had the unflagging energy of a mad man as I sat night after night concentrating on the attempt to solve my problem.

"When it was that you discovered me I do not know. If I had been in an ordinary frame of mind you would never have remained concealed, but I was so absorbed in my task that I never noticed what was going on around me.

"It was not until to-day that I discovered at last

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what I had been so long searching for. The treasure hidden here is greater than that of the richest king in the world, and to find it the meaning of only one more sign had to be deciphered.

"This secret is the most difficult of all, but in my mind I had come even to its solution. That was why I cried out in my delight, 'At last I have found it!' If I wish I can in a moment enter that hidden storehouse of gold and jewels."

Mrityunjaya fell at Shankar's feet and exclaimed: "You are a sannyasi, you have no use for wealth—but take me to that treasure. Do not cheat me again!"

Shankar replied: "To-day the last link of my fetters is broken! That stone which you intended should kill me did not indeed strike my body but it has shattered forever the folly of my infatuation. To-day I have seen how monstrous is the image of desire. That calm and incomprehensible smile of my saintly *Guru* has at last kindled the inextinguishable lamp of my soul."

Mrityunjaya again begged pitifully: "You are free, but I am not. I do not even want freedom. You must not cheat me of this wealth."

The sannyasi answered: "Very well, my son, take this paper of yours, and if you can find this treasure, keep it."

Saying this the sannyasi handed the paper and his staff to Mrityunjaya and left him alone. Mrityunjaya called out in despair: "Have pity on

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me. Do not leave me. Show me the treasure!" But there was no answer.

Mrityunjaya dragged himself up and with the help of the stick tried to find his way out of the tunnels, but they were such a maze that he was again and again completely puzzled. At last worn out he lay down and fell asleep.

When he awoke there was no means of telling whether it was night or day. As he felt hungry he ate some parched rice, and again began to grope for the way out. At length in despair he stopped and called out: "Oh! Sannyasi, where are you?" His cry echoed and re-echoed through the tangled labyrinth of those underground tunnels, and when the sound of his own voice had died away, he heard from close by a reply, "I am near you—what is it you want?"

Mrityunjaya answered: "Have pity on me and show me where the treasure is."

There was no answer, and although he called again and again all was silent.

After a time Mrityunjaya fell asleep again in this underground realm of perpetual darkness where there was neither night nor day. When he woke up and found it still dark he called out beseechingly: "Oh! Sannyasi, tell me where you are."

The answer came from near at hand: "I am here. What do you want?"

Mrityunjaya answered: "I want nothing now but that you should rescue me from this dungeon."

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The sannyasi asked: "Don't you want the treasure?"

Mrityunjaya replied: "No."

There was the sound of a flint being struck and the next moment there was a light. The sannyasi said: "Well Mrityunjaya, let us go."

Mrityunjaya: "Then, father, is all my trouble to be in vain? Shall I never obtain that wealth?"

Immediately the torch went out. Mrityunjaya exclaimed "How cruel!", and sat down in the silence to think. There was no means of measuring time and the darkness was without end. How he wished that he could with all the strength of his mind and body shatter that gloom to atoms. His heart began to feel restless for the light, for the open sky, and for all the varied beauty of the world, and he called out: "Oh! Sannyasi, cruel sannyasi, I do not want the treasure. I want you to rescue me."

The answer came: "You no longer want the treasure? Then take my hand, and come with me."

This time no torch was lighted. Mrityunjaya holding his stick in one hand and clinging to the sannyasi with the other slowly began to move. After twisting and turning many times through the maze of tunnels they came to a place where the sannyasi said, "Now stand still."

Standing still Mrityunjaya heard the sound of an iron door opening. The next moment the sannyasi seized his hand, and said: "Come!"

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Mrityunjaya advanced into what appeared to be a vast hall. He heard the sound of a flint being struck and then the blaze of the torch revealed to his astonished eyes the most amazing sight that he had ever dreamed of. On every side thick plates of gold were arranged in piles. They stood against the walls glittering like heaped rays of solid sunlight stored in the bowels of the earth. Mrityunjaya's eyes began to gleam. Like a mad man he cried: "All this gold is mine—I will never part with it!"

"Very well," replied the sannyasi, "here is my torch, some barley and parched rice, and this large pitcher of water for you. Farewell."

And as he spoke the sannyasi went out, clanging the heavy iron door behind him.

Mrityunjaya began to go round and round the hall touching the piles of gold again and again. Seizing some small pieces he threw them down on the floor, he lifted them into his lap, striking them one against another he made them ring, he even stroked his body all over with the precious metal. At length, tired out, he spread a large flat plate of gold on the floor, lay down on it, and fell asleep.

When he woke he saw the gold glittering on every side. There was nothing but gold. He began to wonder whether day had dawned and whether the birds were awake and revelling in the morning sunlight. It seemed as though in imagination he could smell the fragrant breeze of daybreak coming from the garden by the little

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lake near his home. It was as if he could actually see the ducks floating on the water, and hear their contented cackle as the maidservant came from the house to the steps of the ghat, with the brass vessels in her hand to be cleaned.

Striking the door Mrityunjaya called out: "Oh, Sannyasi, listen to me!"

The door opened and the sannyasi entered. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I want to go out," replied Mrityunjaya, "but can't I take away a little of this gold?"

Without giving any answer the sannyasi lighted a fresh torch, and placing a full water pot and a few handfuls of rice on the floor went out closing the door behind him.

Mrityunjaya took up a thin plate of gold, bent it and broke it into small fragments. These he scattered about the room like lumps of dirt. On some of them he made marks with his teeth. Then he threw a plate of gold on the floor and trampled on it. He asked himself, 'How many men in the world are rich enough to be able to throw gold about as I am doing!' Then he became oppressed with a fever for destruction. He was seized with a longing to crush all these heaps of gold into dust and sweep them away with a broom. In this way he could show his contempt for the covetous greed of all the kings and maharajahs in the world.

At last he became tired of throwing the gold

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about in this way and fell asleep. Again he saw on awakening those heaps of gold, and rushing to the door he struck at it with all his strength and called out: "Oh Sannyasi, I do not want this gold. I do not want it!"

But the door remained closed. Mrityunjaya shouted till his throat was hoarse and still the door did not open. He threw lump after lump of gold against it, but with no effect. He was in despair. Would the sannyasi leave him there to shrivel up and die, inch by inch, in that golden prison?

As Mrityunjaya watched the gold fear gripped him. Those piles of glittering metal surrounded him on all sides with a terrifying smile, hard, silent, without tremor or change, until his body began to tremble, his mind to quake. What connection had he with these heaps of gold? They could not share his feelings—they had no sympathy with him in his sorrows. They had no need of the light, or the sky. They did not long for the cool breezes, they did not even want life. They had no desire for freedom. In this eternal darkness they remained hard and bright for ever.

On earth perhaps sunset had come with its golden gift of limpid light—that golden light which cools the eyes as it bids farewell to the fading day, falling like tears on the face of darkness. Now the evening star would be gazing serenely down on the courtyard of his home where his young wife had tended the cows in the meadow

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and lit the lamp in the corner of the house, while the tinkling of the temple bell spoke of the closing ceremony of the day.

To-day the most trifling events of his home and his village shone in Mrityunjaya's imagination with overpowering lustre. Even the thought of his old dog lying curled up asleep in front of the stove caused him pain. He thought of the grocer in whose shop he had stayed while he was at Dhara-gole and imagined him putting out his lamp, shutting up his shop and walking leisurely to some house in the village to take his evening meal, and as he thought of him he envied him his happiness. He did not know what day it was, but if it were Sunday he could picture to himself the villagers returning to their homes after market, calling their friends from over the fields and crossing the river together in the ferry boat. He could see a peasant, with a couple of fish dangling in his hand and a basket on his head, walking through the meadow paths, or making his way along the dikes of the paddy fields, past the bamboo fences of the little hamlets, returning to his village after the day's work in the dim light of the star-strewn sky.

The call came to him from the world of men. But layers of earth separated him from the most insignificant occurrences of life's varied and unceasing pilgrimage. That life, that sky, and that light appeared to him now as more priceless than all the treasures of the universe. He felt that if

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only he could for one moment again lie in the dusty lap of mother earth in her green clad beauty, beneath the free open spaces of the sky, filling his lungs with the fragrant breeze laden with the scents of mown grass and of blossoms, he could die feeling that his life was complete.

As these thoughts came to him the door opened, and the sannyasi entering asked: "Mrityunjaya, what do you want now?"

He answered: "I want nothing further. I want only to go out from this maze of darkness. I want to leave this delusive gold. I want light, and the sky; I want freedom!"

The sannyasi said: "There is another storehouse full of rarest gems of incalculable value, tenfold more precious than all this gold. Do you not wish to go there?"

Mrityunjaya answered: "No."

"Haven't you the curiosity just to see it once?"

"No, I don't want even to see it. If I have to beg in rags for the rest of my life I would not spend another moment here."

"Then come," said the sannyasi, and taking Mrityunjaya's hand he led him in front of the deep well. Stopping here he took out the paper and asked: "And what will you do with this?"

Taking it Mrityunjaya tore it into fragments and threw them down the well.

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IT HAD RAINED THE PREVIOUS DAY. But this morning there was no sign of rain and the pale sunlight and scattered clouds between them were painting the nearly-ripe autumnal corn-fields alternately with their long brushes ; the broad green landscape was now being touched with light to a glittering whiteness, and again smeared over the next moment with the deep coolness of shadow.

While these two actors, sun and cloud, were playing their own parts by themselves with the whole sky for a stage, innumerable plays were being enacted down below in various places on the stage of the world.

In the particular place on which we are about to raise the curtain on one of life's little plays, a house can be seen by the side of a village lane. Only one of the outer rooms is brick-built, and on either side of it a dilapidated brick wall runs to encircle a few mud huts. From the lane one can discover through the grated window a young man with the upper half of his body uncovered, sitting on a plank bed, trying every now and then to drive away both heat and mosquitoes with a palm-leaf fan held in his left hand and reading attentively a book held in his right. Out in the village lane, a girl wearing a striped *sari*, with some black plums tied in a corner

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thereof, which she was engaged in demolishing one by one, kept passing again and again in front of the said grated window. From the expression of her face it could be clearly perceived that the young girl was on terms of intimacy with the person sitting and reading on the bed inside and that she was bent on attracting his attention somehow or other and letting him know by her silent contempt: 'Just now I am busily engaged in eating black plums and don't care a fig for you.'

Unfortunately, the man engaged in reading inside the room was short-sighted and the silent scorn of the girl could not touch him from afar. The girl herself knew this, so that after many fruitless journeyings to and fro, she was obliged to use pellets of plumstones in lieu of silent scorn. So difficult is it to preserve the purity of disdain when one has to deal with the blind.

When three or four stones thrown at random, as it were, every now and again rapped against the wooden door, the reader raised his head and looked out. When the designing young person came to know this, she began to choose succulent black plums from her *sari*-knot with redoubled attention. The man, puckering his brows and straining his eyes, recognized the girl at last and putting down his book came up to the window and smilingly called out "Giribala!"

Giribala, while keeping her attention fixed steadily and wholly upon the task of examining the

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black plums tied in her *sari*-end, proceeded to walk on slowly step by step.

Upon this it was brought home to the myopic young man that he was being punished for some unknown misdeed. Hurriedly coming outside he asked, "I say, how is it you haven't given me any plums to-day?" Turning a deaf ear to this question Giribala chose a plum after much searching and deliberation, and proceeded to eat it with the utmost composure.

These plums came from Giribala's home-garden, and were the daily perquisite of the young man. But for some reason or other Giribala seemed to have forgotten this fact, and her behaviour went to indicate that she had gathered them for herself alone. However, it was not clear what the idea was of plucking fruit from one's own garden and coming and eating it ostentatiously in front of another's door. Hence the youth came out and caught hold of her hand. At first Giribala turned and twisted and tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but suddenly she burst into a flood of tears and scattering the plums from her *sari* on to the ground, rushed away.

The restless sunlight and shadows of the morning had become tired and tranquil in the afternoon. White swollen clouds lay massed in a corner of the sky and the fading evening light glimmered upon the leaves of the trees, the water in the ponds, and every nook and corner of the rain-washed landscape. Again we see the girl in front of the grated window,

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and the young man sitting inside the room, the only difference being that there are no plums now in the girl's *sari*-end, neither does the youth hold any book in his hand. There may have been certain other deeper and more serious differences also.

It is difficult to say what particular need has brought the girl again this afternoon to this particular spot. Whatever other grounds she may have had, it is quite apparent from her behaviour that talking to the man inside the room is not one of them. Rather it would appear as if she has come to see whether the plums she had scattered upon the ground this morning had sprouted in the afternoon.

But one of the principal reasons for their not sprouting was that the fruits were lying heaped up at present in front of the young man on the wooden bed ; and whilst the girl was occupied in bending low every now and then in search of some imaginary object, the youth, suppressing his inward laughter, was gravely eating the plums one after another, after carefully selecting them. At length, when one or two stones came and fell by chance near the girl's feet or even upon them, she realized that the young man was paying her back for her fit of pique. But was this fair ! When she had thrown overboard all the pride of her little heart and was seeking for some means of surrendering herself, wasn't it cruel of him to place an obstacle in her very difficult path ? As

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the girl came to realize with a blush that she had been caught in the attempt of giving herself up, and began to seek some means of escape, the youth came out and caught hold of her hand.

This time too the girl turned and twisted and made several attempts to shake off his grasp and run away as she had done this morning ; but she did not cry. On the other hand she flushed and, turning her head aside, hid her face on her tormentor's back and laughed profusely and, as if compelled by outward force alone, entered the iron-barred cell like a conquered captive.

Like the light play of sun and cloud in the sky, the play of these two human beings in a corner of the earth was equally trivial and equally transient. Again as the play of sun and cloud in the sky is not really unimportant and not really a game but only looks like it, so the humble history of an idle rainy day spent by these ordinary folk may seem to be of no account amidst the hundreds of events happening in this world ; but as a matter of fact it was not so. The ancient and stupendous Fate that eternally weaves one age into another with unchanging sternness of countenance, that same Ancient was causing the seeds of grief and joy throughout the girl's whole life to sprout amidst the trivial tears and laughter of this morning and evening. And yet the uncalled-for grievance of the girl seemed altogether incomprehensible, not only to the onlookers, but also to the young man—the hero of this little play. Why the

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girl should get annoyed one day and lavish unbounded' affection on another, why she should increase the rations one day and on another stop them altogether, was not easy to understand. Some day it was as if all her powers of imagination and thought and skill were concentrated on giving pleasure to the young man ; again on another day she would muster all her limited stock of energy and hardness to try and hurt him. When she failed to wound him her hardness was redoubled ; when she succeeded, it was dissolved in profuse showers of repentant tears and flowed in a thousand streams of affection.

The first part of the trivial history of this trivial play of sun and shadow is briefly narrated in the following chapter.

2

All the other people in the village were occupied with factions, plotting against one another, sugarcane planting, false lawsuits and trade in jute ; the only ones interested in ideas and literature were Sashibhusan and Giribala.

There was no call for anybody to be curious or anxious on this account. Because Giribala was ten years old and Sashibhushan was a newly-fledged M.A., B.L. They were neighbours only.

Giribala's father Harakumar was at one time the sub-landlord of his village. Falling on evil days, he

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had sold everything and accepted the post of manager of their absentee landlord. He had to superintend the same *parganna* in which he lived, so that he was not obliged to move from his home.

Sashibhushan had taken his M.A. degree and also passed his examination in law, but he did not take up any work for a living. He could not bring himself to mix with people or speak even a few words at a meeting. Because of his short sight he could not recognize his acquaintances, hence he had to resort to frowning, which people considered a sign of arrogance.

It is all very well to keep oneself to oneself in the sea of humanity of a city like Calcutta ; but in a village such behaviour is looked upon as haughtiness. When after many unsuccessful efforts, Sashibhushan's father at length sent his good-for-nothing son to look after their small village estate, Sashibhushan had to put up with a lot of ill-treatment, harassment and ridicule from his village neighbours. There was another reason for this persecution ; peace-loving Sashibhushan was unwilling to marry—hence the worried parents of marriageable girls looked upon this unwillingness of his as intolerable pride and could not find it in their hearts to forgive him.

The more Sashibhushan was persecuted the more he hid himself in his den. He used to sit on a plank bed in a corner room with some bound English volumes before him and read whichever one he

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liked. This was all the work he did, and how the property managed to exist, the property alone knew.

We have already seen that Giribala was the only human being with whom he had any contact.

Giribala's brothers used to go to school and on their return would ask their silly little sister some day what the shape of the earth was ; another day they would want to know which was bigger, the sun or the earth. And when she made mistakes, they corrected her with infinite contempt. If in the absence of proof to the contrary, Giribala considered the belief that the sun was bigger than the earth to be groundless, and if she had the boldness to express her doubts, then her brothers would declare with redoubled scorn, "Indeed ! it is written in our books, and you—".

When Giribala heard that this fact was recorded in printed books, she was completely silenced and did not think any other proof necessary.

But she felt a great desire to be able to read books like her brothers. Some days she would sit in her own room with an open book before her, and go on muttering to herself as if she were reading, and keep turning over the pages quickly one after another. The small black unknown letters seemed to be keeping guard at the lion's gate of some great hall of mystery in endless serried rows, with bayonets of vowels raised aloft on their shoulders, and gave no reply to the questions put by Giribala. The

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Book of Fables revealed not a single word of its tigers, foxes, horses and donkeys to the curiosity-tormented girl, and the Book of Tales with all its tales remained gazing dumbly as if under a vow of silence.

Giribala had suggested taking lessons from her brothers, but they had not paid the slightest heed to her request. Sashibhushan was her sole ally.

Like the Fables and The Book of Tales, Sashibhushan also at first seemed to Giribala to be full of inscrutable mystery. The young man used to sit alone in the small sitting-room with iron-grated windows by the roadside, on a plank bed surrounded by books. Standing outside and catching hold of the bars Giribala would fix a wondering gaze upon this strange figure with bent back, absorbed in reading ; and comparing the number of books, would decide in her own mind that Sashibhushan was much more learned than her brothers. She could conceive of nothing more wonderful than this.

She had not the slightest doubt that Sashibhushan had read through all the world's greatest books, such as the Book of Fables, etc. Hence when Sashibhushan turned over the pages, she stood stockstill, unable to measure the depths of his learning.

At length this wonderstruck girl came to attract the attention even of the short-sighted Sashibhushan. One day he opened a glittering bound

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volume and said, "Giribala, come and look at the pictures." Giribala immediately ran away.

This is how their acquaintance started, and it would require some historical research to determine the exact date on which it ripened into intimacy and the girl, entering Sashibhushan's room from outside the grating, obtained a seat amongst the bound books on the plank bed.

Giribala began taking lessons from Sashibhushan. My readers will laugh when they hear that this teacher taught his little pupil not only her letters, spelling and grammar, but translated and read out many great poems to her and asked her opinion of them. God alone knows what the girl understood but that she liked it, there is no doubt. She drew many imaginary and wonderful pictures in her child-mind, made up of a mixture of understanding and non-understanding, and she listened intently and silently with wide-open eyes, asked one or two altogether foolish questions now and then, and sometimes veered off suddenly to an irrelevant subject. Sashibhushan never objected to this, but derived a particular pleasure from hearing this tiny little critic praise and blame and comment on famous poems. Giribala was his only discerning friend in the whole neighbourhood.

When Sashibhushan first came to know her, Giri was eight years old ; now she was ten. In these two years, she had learnt the English and Bengali alphabet, and finished reading three or four easy

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books. At the same time Sashibhushan also had not felt these two years of village life to be altogether lonely and uninteresting.

3

But Sashibhushan had not been able to get on well with Giribala's father Harakumar. Harakumar used to come and ask this M.A., B.L. to advise him about his law-suits. The said M.A., B.L., however, did not show much interest, nor did he hesitate to confess his ignorance of law to the Manager Babu, who considered this to be pure evasion. In this way two years passed.

At about this time, it had become imperative to punish a recalcitrant tenant. The Manager Babu earnestly entreated Sashibhushan to advise him with regard to his intention of prosecuting the said tenant in different districts on different charges and claims. But far from advising him, Sashibhushan said certain things to him quietly yet firmly, which did not strike him as being at all pleasant.

On the other hand Harakumar was unable to win a single case against this tenant, so he became firmly convinced that Sashibhushan had been helping the unfortunate man and vowed that the village should be rid of such a person without delay.

Sashibhushan found that cows kept straying into his fields, his pulse-stores were catching fire, his boundaries were being disputed, his tenants were

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making difficulties about paying their rents and not only that, were trying to bring false cases against him. There were even rumours that he would get a beating if he went out in the evenings, and his house would be set on fire some night.

At last the harmless peace-loving Sashibhushan prepared to leave the village and escape to Calcutta.

Whilst he was making his preparations, the Joint Magistrate Sahib's tents were pitched in the village, which thereupon became astir with constables, *khansamas*, dogs, horses, *syces* and sweepers. Batches of small boys began to wander about the outskirts of the Sahib's camp with fearful curiosity, like packs of jackals on a tiger's trail.

The Manager Babu proceeded to supply fowls, eggs, *ghee* and milk to the Sahib under the heading of hospitality, according to custom. He freely and unquestioningly supplied a much larger quantity of food than was actually required by the Joint Sahib; but when the Sahib's sweeper came one morning and demanded four seers of *ghee* at once for the Sahib's dog, then, as ill-luck would have it, Harakumar felt this was the limit and explained to the sweeper that though the Sahib's dog could doubtlessly digest much more *ghee* than a country dog without fear of consequences, still such a large quantity of fat was not good for its health; and he refused to supply the *ghee*.

The sweeper went and told the Sahib that he had gone to enquire from the Manager Babu where

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dog's-meat could be had, but because he belonged to the sweeper caste the Manager had driven him away with contempt before everybody, and had not even hesitated to show disrespect to the Sahib.

As a rule Sahibs are easily offended by the Brahmin's pride of caste, moreover, they had dared to insult his sweeper ; so that he found it impossible to control his temper, and immediately ordered his *chaprassi* to send for the Manager Babu.

The trembling Manager came and stood before the Sahib's tent, inwardly muttering the name of the goddess Durga. Coming out of the tent with loud creaking of boots, the Sahib shouted at the Manager in Bengali with a foreign accent: "Why have you driven away my sweeper?"

The flurried Harakumar hastened to assure the Sahib with folded hands that he could never dare to be so insolent as to drive away the Sahib's sweeper, but since the latter had asked for four seers of *ghee* at once for the dog, he (the Manager) had at first entered a mild protest in the interests of the said quadruped, and then sent out messengers to various places for procuring the *ghee*.

The Sahib enquired who had been sent out and where.

Harakumar promptly mentioned some names haphazard as they occurred to him.

The Sahib despatched messengers at once to enquire whether the aforesaid persons had been

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sent to the aforesaid villages to procure *ghee*, and meanwhile kept the Manager Babu waiting in his tent.

The messengers came back in the afternoon and informed the Sahib that nobody had been sent anywhere for the *ghee*. This left no doubt in his mind that everything the Manager had said was false and his sweeper had spoken the truth. Whereupon, roaring with rage, the Joint Sahib called the sweeper and said, "Catch hold of this swine by the ear and race him round the tent", which command the sweeper executed in front of the crowd of spectators, without waste of time.

The report of this event spread like wild fire through the village and Harakumar came home and lay down like one half dead, without touching a morsel of food.

The Manager had made many enemies in connection with his *zemindari* work. They were overjoyed at the news, but when the departing Sashibhushan heard it, his blood boiled within him, and he could not sleep the whole night.

Next morning he went to Harakumar's house; the latter caught hold of his hand and began to weep bitterly. Sashibhushan said, "A case for libel must be brought against the Sahib, and I will fight it as your counsel."

At first Harakumar was frightened to hear that a suit must be filed against the Magistrate Sahib himself, but Sashibhushan strongly insisted upon it.

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Harakumar asked for time to think it over. But when he found that the rumour had spread throughout the village and his enemies were openly expressing their jubilation, he hesitated no longer, and appealed to Sashibhushan, saying "My boy, I hear you are preparing to go to Calcutta for no ostensible reason—but you can't possibly do so. It is such a tower of strength for us to have a person like you in the village! Anyhow you must deliver me from this terrible indignity."

4

That Sashibhushan who had hitherto always tried to lead a guarded and secluded life screened from the public eye, it was that same Sasibhushan who now presented himself in court. On hearing his case, the Magistrate took him into his private chamber, and treated him with the utmost courtesy, saying "Sashi Babu, wouldn't it be better to compromise this case privately?"

Keeping his short-sighted frowning gaze fixed very steadily upon the cover of a law-book lying on the table Sashi Babu replied, "I cannot advise my client to do so. How can he make a compromise privately when he has been insulted publicly?"

After exchanging a few words, the Sahib realized that this myopic and laconic young man was not to be easily moved and said, "All right Babu, let's see how it turns out in the end."

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Saying which, the Magistrate adjourned the case and went on tour to the moffussil.

On the other hand, the Joint Sahib wrote as follows to the Zemindar: "Your Manager has insulted my servants and shown disrespect to me. I trust you will take necessary action."

The Zemindar was thoroughly upset and sent for Harakumar at once. The Manager recounted the whole affair in detail, from beginning to end. The Zemindar got extremely annoyed and said, "When the Sahib's sweeper asked for four seers of *ghee*, why didn't you give it to him at once without any question? Would it have cost you your father's money?"

Harakumar couldn't deny that his paternal property would not have suffered any loss thereby. Admitting he was to blame, he said, "It was my bad luck that made me act so foolishly."

"Then again, who told you to prosecute the Sahib", asked the Zemindar. "O Incarnation of Righteousness", replied Harakumar, "I had no wish to prosecute: it was that young fellow Sashi of our village, who never gets a single brief—who got me into this mess by insisting upon it, almost without my permission."

Whereupon the Zemindar became highly incensed with Sashibhushan. He gathered that the aforesaid youth was a worthless new pleader, who was trying to attract the public eye by creating a sensation. He ordered the Manager to withdraw

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the case, and appease the pair of magistrates, elder and younger, immediately.

The Manager presented himself at the Joint Magistrate's quarters with a peace-offering of fruits and sweets calculated to cool the atmosphere. He informed the Sahib that it was altogether foreign to his nature to bring a case against him ; it was only that green young duffer of a pleader known as Sashibhushan of their village who had the impudence to act thus, practically without his knowledge. The Sahib was exceedingly annoyed with Sashibhushan and extremely pleased with the Manager, whom he was *dukkhit* to have given *dandobidhan* in a fit of temper. The Sahib had recently won a prize in a Bengali examination, hence he was given to speaking in high-flown book language with all and sundry.

The Manager averred that parents sometimes punished their children in anger, at others drew them into their affectionate embrace, so that there was no occasion for either the parents or the children to feel sorry.

Whereupon, after distributing adequate *largesse* to all the Joint Sahib's servants, Harakumar went to the moffussil to see the Magistrate Sahib. After hearing all about Sashibhushan's arrogant behaviour from him, the Magistrate remarked, "It struck me also as very strange that the Manager Babu whom I had always thought to be such a nice person, instead of informing me first and

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arranging for private compromise, should rush to bring a suit. The whole thing seemed so preposterous! Now I understand everything."

Finally he asked the Manager whether Sashibhushan had joined the Congress. Without turning a hair the latter calmly replied, "Yes".

The Sahib's normal ruling-race complex led him to perceive clearly that this was all the Congress' doing. The myrmidons of the Congress were secretly going about everywhere seeking for opportunities to engineer trouble and write articles in the *Amrit Bazar* picking a quarrel with the Government. The Sahib inwardly cursed the Government of India's weakness in not giving more summary powers to the Magistrates to crush these puny thorns underfoot forthwith. But the name of Sashibhushan the Congressman remained in the Magistrate's memory.

5

When the big things of life raise their powerful heads, the small things also are not deterred from spreading their hungry little network of roots and putting forward their claim in the affairs of the world.

When Sashibhushan was particularly busy with the Magistrate's annoying case, when he was collecting notes on law from various volumes, sharpening in his mind the points he would make in his speech,

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cross-examining imaginary witnesses, and trembling and perspiring every now and again at the mental picture of the crowded court-room and the future sequence of cantos in his war-epic—then his little pupil used to come regularly to his door, shabby reader and ink-stained exercise-book in hand, sometimes with flowers and fruit, sometimes with pickles, cocoanut-sweets and spiced home-made catechu with the fragrance of the *ketaki* from her mother's store-room.

The first few days she noticed that Sashibhushan was absent-mindedly turning over the pages of a huge forbidding-looking volume without pictures, but it did not seem as if he was reading it very attentively either. Sashibhushan used to try and explain to Giribala some portion at least of the books he read on other occasions—were there then not even a few words in that heavy black-bound volume which he could read out to her? And in any case, was that book so very important and Giribala so very insignificant?

At first, in order to attract her preceptor's attention, Giribala began to spell and read her lessons out aloud in a sing-song tone, swaying the upper half of her body including her plait, violently to and fro. But she found this plan did not work very well. She became intensely annoyed in her own mind with that heavy black book, which she began to look upon as an ugly, hard, cruel human being. Every unintelligible page of that book took on the

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form of a wicked man's face and silently expressed its utter contempt of Giribala, because she was a little girl. If some thief could have stolen that book, she would have rewarded him with all the spiced catechu in her mother's store-room. The gods did not listen to all the unreasonable and impossible prayers she mentally said to them for the destruction of that book, nor do I think it necessary for my readers to hear them either.

Then the dejected girl gave up going to her tutor's home, lesson-book in hand, for a day or two. On coming to the path in front of Sashibhushan's room to see the result of these two days of separation, and glancing inside, she found that Sashibhushan, putting aside the black book, was standing alone and addressing the iron bars in some foreign language with gesticulations. Probably he was experimenting on those irons how to melt the heart of the judge.

Sashibhushan the bookworm, ignorant of the ways of the world, thought it not altogether impossible even in these mercenary days to perform the wonderful feats of orators like Demosthenes, Cicero, Burke, Sheridan, etc., who by the piercing arrows of their winged words had torn injustice to shreds, cowed down the tyrant, and humbled pride to the dust in the olden days. Standing in the small dilapidated house of Tilkuchi village, Sashibhushan was practising how to put to shame the arrogant English race flushed with the

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wine of victory, and make them repent for their misdeeds before the whole world. Whether the gods in heaven laughed to hear him or whether their divine eyes moistened with tears, nobody knows.

So he failed to notice Giribala. On that day the girl had no plums in her *sari*-end. Having been caught once in the act of throwing plum-stones, she had become very sensitive with regard to that fruit, so much so that if Sashibhushan innocently asked some day—"Giri, are there no plums for me to-day?" she took it to be a veiled taunt and prepared to run away with the reproving exclamation "*Jah!*" on her lips.

In the absence of plum-stones, she had to take recourse to a trick to-day. Suddenly looking at a distant point, she cried, "Swarna, dear, don't go, I shall be coming in a minute."

My masculine readers may think that these words were addressed to some distant companion, but my feminine readers will easily surmise that there was nobody in the distance and that the object aimed at was close at hand. But alas! the shot missed the blind man. Not that Sashibhushan had not heard, but he failed to perceive the purport of the call. He thought that the girl was really anxious to go and play and he had not the energy that day to draw her away from play to study, because he also was trying to aim his sharp arrows at somebody's heart. Just as the trifling aim of the girl's small hand

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missed the mark, so did the high aim of his practised hand, as my readers already know.

Plum-stones have this advantage that they can be thrown several times and if four miss the mark, then the fifth has a chance of hitting it. But however imaginary a person Swarna may be, she cannot be kept standing for long after one has told her "I am coming." If one treats her so, then people may naturally begin to entertain doubts as to her existence. So when this means failed, Giribala had to go without further delay. Still one did not notice in her steps that celerity which a sincere desire to join a distant companion would have warranted. It was as if she were trying to feel with her back whether anyone was following her or not ; when she knew for certain that nobody was coming, then with a last feeble fraction of hope she looked round once, and not seeing anyone tore to pieces both that tiny hope and her loose-leaved lesson-book and scattered them on the road. If she could have found some possible means of returning the little knowledge that Sashibhushan had imparted to her, then probably she would have thrown it all down with a bang at Sashibhushan's door like the unwanted plum-stones, and come away. The girl vowed that before she met Sashibhushan next, she would forget all her lessons and not be able to answer any question he put to her—not one, not one, not even a single one! And then! Then Sashibhushan would be served right.

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Giribala's eyes filled with tears. She derived some small comfort in her aching heart from thinking how deeply repentant Sashibhushan would feel if she forgot all her lessons, and a spring of pity welled up in her imagination for that future wretched Giribala, who would forget everything she had learnt, simply for Sashibhushan's fault.

Clouds gathered in the sky, as they do every day in the rainy season. Giribala stood behind a roadside tree sobbing for wounded pride. Such idle tears are shed every day by many a girl; it was nothing worthy of note.

6

My readers are aware of the reasons why Sashibhushan's researches into the law and his essays in oratory proved fruitless. The case against the Magistrate was suddenly withdrawn. Harakumar was appointed an Honorary Magistrate on the District bench and he used to go often to the district town in a soiled *chapkan* and greasy turban, to pay his respects to the Sahibs.

At long last Giribala's curses on that fat black book began to bear fruit—and it lay neglected, forgotten and exiled in a dark corner, collecting dust. But where was Giribala the girl who would have taken delight in this neglect?

The day when Sashibhushan closed his law-book and sat alone, he suddenly realized that Giribala

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had not come. Then he began to recollect the daily history of those few days, little by little. He remembered how one bright morning Giribala had brought a heap of *bakul* flowers wet with the new rains, tied in a corner of her *sari*. When he did not raise his eyes from his book even on seeing her, her ardour became suddenly damped. Taking a needle-and-thread stuck in her *sari*-end, she began to weave a garland of *bakul* flowers one by one, with bent head. She wove it very slowly, and it took a long time to finish; the day began to wear on, it was time for Giribala to go home, and yet Sashibhushan had not finished reading. Giribala left the garland on the plank bed, and sorrowfully went away. He remembered how her wounded feelings gradually gained in depth everyday; how the time came when she gave up entering his room, and would appear now and again on the footpath in front and go away; and how at last the girl had even given up coming to the path—that too was now some days ago. Giribala's fit of pique never used to last so long. Sashibhushan sighed and remained sitting with his back against the wall like one bewildered and with nothing to do. In the absence of his little pupil, his books became distasteful to him.

He kept pulling one or two books towards him, then pushing them away again after reading two or three pages. If he began to write, his expectant eyes would throw an eager glance every now and

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again towards the lane and the house opposite, and his writing would be interrupted.

Sashibhushan was afraid Giribala had fallen ill. On making discreet enquiries, however, he learnt that his fears were groundless. Giribala did not go out of the house nowadays. A bridegroom had been settled for her.

On the morning following the day on which Giribala had strewn the muddy village lane with the torn leaves of her lesson-book, she was leaving the house early with quick steps, bearing various presents tied in her little *sari*-corner. Having passed a sleepless night owing to the intense heat, Harakumar was sitting outside with bared body, pulling at his *hookah*, since early morning. "Where are you going?" he asked Giri. "To Sashidada's house", she replied. "You needn't go to Sashibhushan's house", scolded Harakumar, "go back home". Saying which he spoke long and sternly to her anent the shameless behaviour of a grown-up girl about to enter her father-in-law's house. Since that day she had been forbidden to leave the house. This time she found no opportunity of humbling her pride and making it up with Sashibhushan. Mango-preserves, spiced catechu and pickled limes were relegated to their proper place on the store-room shelf. It went on raining, the *bakul* flowers went on falling, the guava-trees became laden with ripe fruit, and the ground beneath the plum trees became littered every day with succulent

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black plums dropped from the branches by pecking birds. Alas ! even the loose-leaved lesson-book was no longer there.

7

On the day when the *sanai* was playing in the village for Giribala's wedding, the uninvited Sashibhushan was going to Calcutta by boat.

Since the withdrawal of the lawsuit the very sight of Sashibhushan had become a curse to Harakumar, for he was certain in his own mind that Sashibhushan looked down upon him with contempt. He began to discover a thousand imaginary proofs of this in Sashibhushan's looks and behaviour. All the other village-folk were gradually forgetting the history of his past indignity, only Sashibhushan was keeping alive its memory, he thought ; hence he could not bear him. Whenever he met him, he used to feel a kind of shrinking shame, accompanied by a strong resentment. He vowed to himself that he would drive Sashibhushan out of the village.

It was not a very difficult task to constrain a person like Sashibhushan to leave the village. So the Manager Babu's desire was soon fulfilled. One morning Sashibhushan got into a boat with a load of books and a few tin boxes. The one happy tie that had bound him to the village, even that was being snapped to-day with great *éclat*. He had not fully realized before how firmly that delicate bond

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had entwined itself around his heart. To-day when the boat set off, when the tops of the village trees and the sound of the wedding-music became gradually more and more indistinct, then suddenly a mist of tears spread over his heart and choked his voice, a rush of blood caused the veins in his forehead to throb with pain, and the whole panorama of the world seemed exceedingly hazy as if composed of shadowy illusion.

A strong wind was blowing from the opposite direction ; hence the boat advanced slowly, though the current was favourable. At this juncture something happened on the river, which hindered Sashibhushan's journey.

A new steamer line had recently been opened from the station landing-place to the district town. Their steamer came noisily puffing along against the current, with its propellers working like wings and setting up waves on either side. The young Manager Sahib of the new line and a few passengers were on board, among whom were some inhabitants of Sashibhushan's village.

A money-lender's country-boat was trying to race the steamer from a little way off ; at times it seemed about to catch up with her, and again kept falling behind. The boatman's spirit of rivalry was awakened. He put out a second sail on top of the first one, and even a third small sail atop of that. The tall mast bent low before the blast, and the parted waves danced madly with a loud splashing

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noise, on either side of the boat. The boat plunged forward like a horse with its reins snapped. At a certain point the path of the steamer took a slight bend, and here the boat outstripped it by taking a shorter cut. The Manager Sahib was leaning over the railing, eagerly watching this race. When the boat was flying along at top speed and had outstripped the steamer by about a yard, just then the Sahib raised his revolver and fired a shot at the swollen sail. In a moment the sail burst, the boat sank, and the steamer was hidden from sight round the bend.

Why the Manager acted thus, it is difficult to say. We Bengalees cannot always understand the workings of the Sahib's mind. Perhaps he felt the rivalry of an Indian sail to be intolerable ; perhaps there is a fierce pleasure in putting a bullet through something broad and swollen in the twinkling of an eye ; perhaps there is a certain ferocious and fiendish humour in putting the proud boat *hors de combat* in a second by making a few holes in its cloth. What the reason was I do not know exactly. But this I know for certain that the Englishman believed he would not be liable to be punished for this little joke, and he had an idea that the people whose boat was lost and who were in danger of losing their lives also could not be counted as human beings.

When the Sahib fired and the boat sank, Sashibhushan's boat had approached the place of

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occurrence. Sashibhushan was an eye-witness of the last scene. He hastened to the spot with his boat and rescued the boatmen. Only the man who was grinding spices for cooking in the kitchen could not be traced. The rain-swollen river flowed on swiftly.

The hot blood boiled in Sashibhushan's veins. The law was very dilatory—like a huge complex iron machine; it accepted proofs after weighing them, and apportioned punishment calmly—it did not possess the warmth of the human heart. But to separate food from hunger, desire from enjoyment, and anger from punishment appeared to Sashibhushan to be equally unnatural. There are many crimes which as soon as witnessed demand an immediate retribution from the witness' own hand, otherwise the god in him seems to sear the witness from within. At such a moment one feels inwardly ashamed to find comfort in the idea of the law. But the machine-made law and the machine-made steamer took the Manager further away from Sashibhushan. Whether the world was benefited in other ways, I cannot say, but this much is certain that Sashibhushan's Indian spleen was saved at this juncture.

Sashibhushan returned to the village with the boatmen who had survived. The boat had been laden with jute, which he appointed men to salvage, and tried to persuade the boatman to bring a police-case against the manager.

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But the boatman was unwilling to do so. He said the boat was sunk for good, but he was not prepared to sink with it. First of all, he would have to grease the palms of the police; then he would have to give up all work and food and rest and wander about the law-courts; then God alone knows what trouble was in store for him and what the result would be if he prosecuted the Sahib. At last when he heard that Sashibhushan was himself a pleader, that he himself would pay all the costs of the suit and that there was every chance of his getting damages, he agreed. But the people of Sashibhushan's village who were present on board the steamer flatly refused to bear witness. "We didn't see anything, sir", they said to Sashibhushan, "we were at the back of the steamer, it was impossible to hear a gunshot for the throbbing of the machine and the lapping of the water."

Inwardly cursing his countrymen, Sashibhushan continued to conduct the case before the magistrate.

No witnesses were required. The manager admitted he had fired a shot. He said it was aimed at a flock of cranes flying in the sky. The steamer was then going at full speed and had just turned round the bend. So he could not possibly know whether a crow died or a crane died or the boat sank. Earth and sky contained so many things to aim at that no man in his senses would knowingly waste a pice-worth of shot on a dirty rag.

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Acquitted on all charges, the Manager Sahib, puffing at a cigar, went to play whist at his club. The dead body of the man who was grinding spices in the boat was washed up on land nine miles farther off, and Sashibhushan returned to his village with frustration raging in his breast.

The day he returned, they were taking Giribala to her husband's home in a decorated boat. Though nobody had asked him, yet Sashibhushan came slowly to the riverside. The landing-place was crowded, so instead of going there he stood a little way off. When the boat left the landing-steps and passed in front of him, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the new bride, sitting with her *sari* drawn down over her bowed head. Giribala had long been hoping to see Sashibhushan somehow or other before leaving the village, but to-day she did not even know that her preceptor was standing there not very far away. She did not even raise her head once to look; only the tears coursed down both her cheeks in silent weeping.

The boat gradually receded and passed out of sight. The morning light glittered on the river; from the branch of a mango-tree nearby, a *papia* burst into rapturous song every now and then, seeking in vain to unburden the passion of its heart; the ferry-boat, laden with passengers, kept plying from one side of the river to the other; the women coming to the landing-steps to draw water, began discussing Giri's departure for her father-in-law's

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house in a loud babel of voices ; and Sashibhushan, taking off his glasses and wiping his eyes, turned back and entered the small iron-grated room by the roadside. Suddenly it seemed as if he heard Giribala's voice calling "Sashidada!"—Where, oh where?

Nowhere! Not in the room, not in the lane, not in the village—but in the midst of his own heart.

8

Sashibhushan again packed up his things and started for Calcutta. He had nothing to do in Calcutta, there was no particular object in going there ; so instead of going by rail, he decided to travel all the way by boat.

At the height of the rainy season, a network of big and small zig-zag waterways had spread over the whole of Bengal. The veins and arteries of this green land seemed to be overflowing with sap on all sides into trees and plants, bushes and grass, corn and jute and sugarcane, in a mad exuberance of riotous youth.

Sashibhushan's boat proceeded to thread its way through all these narrow serpentine alleys of water, which had by then become level with the bank. The white-tufted grass and reeds and in some places the cornfields were under water. The bamboo-groves and mango-groves and fencing of the village had reached the very edge of the river, as if the

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daughters of the gods had filled with water to the brink the circular grooves around the tree-roots.

When he set out the woods were bright and smiling and glistening after their bath ; but it soon clouded over and began to rain ; whichever way one turned, it looked dismal and dingy. Just as during a flood, the cattle huddle together in their dirty, slushy, narrow byre and get drenched in the incessant showers of July, standing patiently with pathetic eyes ; so was the harassed countryside of Bengal, dumb and sorrowful, being soaked continuously in its dense swamped and slippery jungles. The peasants were going about with their palm-leaf umbrellas ; the women were going from one hut to another in the course of their daily household duties, getting drenched and shrinking from the cold wet wind and treading the slippery landing-stairs very cautiously to draw water from the river in their wet clothes. The men were sitting in their verandahs smoking, or if absolutely necessary, going out with *chaddar* wound round the waist, umbrellas over their heads and shoes in their hands. It is not one of our ancient and sacred customs to provide our long-suffering womenfolk with umbrellas in this sun-burnt and rain-swept land of Bengal.

When the rain showed no signs of stopping, Sashibhushan began to get tired of the closed boat, and again decided to travel by rail. Arriving at a wide confluence of the river, he moored the boat and began to prepare for his midday meal.

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It is the lame man's foot that falls into the ditch, as the saying goes. It is not the fault of the ditch alone, but the lame man's foot also has a special bent for falling into the ditch. On that day Sashibhushan furnished a good proof of this.

The fishermen had fixed bamboo-poles on either side of the confluence of two rivers and spread a huge net over them, keeping only room on one side for boats to pass. They had been doing this since a long time, and also paying rent for it. As ill-luck would have it, this year the august District Superintendent of Police had suddenly deigned to come this way. Seeing his boat draw near, the fishermen warned his boatman beforehand in a loud voice and pointed out the passage at the side. But the Sahib's boatman was not in the habit of showing deference to any man-made barrier by taking a round-about route, so he steered the boat clean through the net. The net stooped and made way for the boat, but its rudder became enmeshed and it took some time and trouble to disentangle it.

The Police Sahib got extremely red and angry, and had the boat moored. The four fishermen, seeing his threatening attitude, promptly decamped. The Sahib ordered his oarsmen to cut up the net, and the huge net, made at a cost of seven or eight hundred rupees, was cut to pieces.

After venting his wrath on the net, the Sahib finally sent for the fishermen. Unable to find the four runaway men, the constable caught hold of

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whichever four fishermen came to hand. They pleaded their innocence with folded hands supplicatingly. As the Police Bahadur was giving orders to his men to take the prisoners along with them, the bespectacled Sashibhushan with an unbuttoned shirt hastily thrown over his shoulders and his slippers pattering on the ground came in breathless haste to the police boat. In a quivering voice he said, "Sir, you have no right to cut up the net of these fishermen, and to harass these four men."

As soon as the Burra Sahib of the Police uttered a particularly offensive invective in Hindi, Sashibhushan sprang into the boat from the slightly raised river-bank, and throwing himself at once upon the Sahib, began to pummel him right and left like a child, like a madman.

After that he did not know what happened. When he awoke in the police-station, we are constrained to say that the treatment he received was conducive neither to his sense of dignity nor to his physical comfort.

9

Sashibhushan's father, with the assistance of pleaders and barristers, first got his son released on bail. Then preparations were set afoot for conducting the case.

The fishermen whose net had been destroyed belonged to the same holding and were under the

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same zemindar as Sashibhushan. When in difficulty, they used to come to him sometimes for legal advice. The men who had been seized and brought to the boat by the Sahib were also not unknown to him.

Sashibhushan sent for them in order to cite them as witnesses, but they were frightened out of their wits. If those who had to pass their daily lives with wife and children were to quarrel with the police, then where would their troubles end? How many lives were there in one man's body? The loss they had suffered was over and done with, now why this further trouble of a subpoena for bearing witness! "Sir, you have landed us in a great mess!" they all declared.

After much persuasion, they agreed to tell the truth.

In the meantime, when Harakumar took the opportunity of sitting on the bench to go and *salaam* the Sahibs, the Police Sahib said with a smile, "Manager Babu, I hear your tenants are ready to bear false witness against the police."

"Indeed! is such a thing possible?" said the startled manager, "that the sons of swine should have it in their bones to dare to do a thing like that!"

Readers of newspapers know that Sashibhushan's case had no legs to stand on.

One by one the fishermen came and deposed that the Sahib had not cut up their net, but had sent for

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them to the boat and taken down their names and addresses.

Not only that, but three or four of his village acquaintances stated that they were present at the place and time of occurrence, as members of a wedding-party, and had seen with their own eyes how Sashibhushan without any provocation had come forward and harassed the police constables.

Sashibhushan admitted that on being abused he had jumped into the boat and struck the Sahib ; but the real reason for that was the destruction of the net and the ill-treatment of the fishermen.

Under the circumstances, that Sashibhushan should be punished could not be called unjust. But the sentence was somewhat severe. There were three or four charges—assault, trespass, interfering with police officers on duty, etc.—all of which were fully proved against him.

Leaving his beloved books in that small room, Sashibhushan went to jail for five years. When his father wanted to appeal, Sashibhushan repeatedly forbade him to do so. "Jail is welcome", he said, "iron bonds don't lie, but the freedom we have outside deceives us and gets us into trouble. And if you talk of good company, then the liars and cowards in jail are comparatively fewer, because there is less room—outside their number is much larger."

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10

Soon after Sashibhushan went to jail, his father died. He had hardly any relatives to speak of. A brother of his had been holding a post in the Central Provinces since a long time, and could not make it convenient to come home very often ; he had built a house for himself and settled there with his family. Whatever property he had in his village home was mostly appropriated by the manager Harakumar on various pretexts.

Fate so willed it that Sashibhushan had to undergo much more suffering in jail than usually fell to the lot of prisoners. Still the five long years passed.

Again one rainy day Sashibhushan came and stood outside the prison-walls with ruined health and vacant mind. He had gained his freedom, and that was all he had : he had no one and nothing to call his own. With no home, no relatives and no friends, he felt that the vast world was too big and loose for his solitary self.

While he was deliberating where to begin to pick up the broken threads of his life, a big carriage and pair came and stood in front of him. A servant alighted and asked him, "Is your name Sashibhushan Babu?" "Yes", he replied.

The man immediately held open the carriage-door and waited for Sashibhushan to get in. "Where am I to go?" he asked in surprise.

"My master has sent for you", replied the servant.

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As the curious looks of the passers-by were getting intolerable, Sashibhushan jumped into the carriage without more ado. Surely there must be some mistake, he thought to himself. But he had to go somewhere in any case, and a mistake might just as well serve as the prelude to a new life.

On that day also sunshine and clouds were chasing each other all over the sky ; and the rain-washed dark green corn-fields skirting the road were chequered with the lively play of sun and shadow. There was a huge chariot lying near the market-place, and from a grocer's shop nearby some Vaishnava mendicants were singing to the accompaniment of string instruments, drums and cymbals:

*Come back, come back ! O lord of my heart,
Beloved, come back to this hungry,
parched and fevered breast.*

As the carriage advanced, the lines of the song could be heard growing fainter and still more faint in the distance:

*O cruel one, come back ! O soft and loving come !
Come back, O thou of the tender hue
of the rain cloud !*

The words of the song became gradually blurred and indistinct and could no longer be followed. But its rhythm had set up a turmoil in Sashibhushan's breast ; he began humming to himself and adding

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line after line to the song, and seemed unable to stop:

O my joy forever and forever my grief,
come back!

*O treasure churned from all my grief and joy,
come to my heart.*

*O ever-desired, and ever-cherished one,
O thou fleeting, O thou everlasting,
 come to my arms.*

*Come to my bosom, to my eyes, in my sleep,
in my dreams, in the clothes and jewels I wear,
to my whole world.*

*Come in the laughter of my lips, in the
tears of my eyes,*

*My caresses, my wiles, my wounded pride,
In every remembrance and in forgetfulness.*

*In my faith and my work, my love's
ardour and shyness,*

In my life and my death, O come!

Sashibhushan's singing came to an end when the carriage entered a walled garden and stopped in front of a two-storeyed house.

Without asking any questions he followed the servant's directions and entered the house.

The room in which he came and sat was lined on all sides with big glass bookcases filled with rows upon rows of books of various colours and various bindings. At this sight his former life was set free from prison at once for the second time. These

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gilted and multi-coloured books seemed to him like familiar jewelled lion-gates at the entrance of the kingdom of joy.

There were some things lying on the table also. The short-sighted Sashibhushan bent forward and saw a cracked slate upon which were some old exercise-books, a much-torn arithmetic-book, the Book of Fables and a Kashiram Das Mahabharata.

Upon the wooden frame of the slate was written in bold characters in Sashibhushan's hand—Giribala Devi. Upon the books and exercise-books the same name was written in the same hand.

Now Sashibhushan knew where he had come. The blood coursed wildly in his veins. He looked out of the open window, and what did he see there? The small iron-barred room, the uneven village lane, the little girl in a striped *sari*,—and his own care-free, quiet and peaceful daily life.

The happy life of those days was nothing wonderful nor extraordinary ; day after day used to pass by unconsciously in trivial tasks and trivial joys, and the teaching of a little girl pupil was only one amongst those trifling things ; but that secluded life in a village-corner, that circumscribed peace, those small joys, the face of that little girl—everything seemed to exist in a land of desire and shadowy imagination—in a heaven outside time and space and beyond his grasp.

All the scenes and memories of those bygone days, mingled with the soft light of this rainy

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morning and the *kirtan* song softly ringing in his ears, seemed to take on a new beauty of melodious sound and radiant light. The memory of the sad and hurt look on the face of the little neglected girl as he had last seen her in the jungle-girt muddy village lane was transformed on the canvas of his mind into a unique and wonderful picture full of deep pathos and a divine beauty. The sad tune of the *kirtan* blended with that picture, and it seemed to him that the ineffable sorrow at the heart of the universe had cast its shadow upon the face of that village maiden. Placing both arms on the slate and books upon the table, and hiding his face in them, Sashibhushan began after many years to dream dreams of long ago.

After a long time, hearing a slight noise Sashibhushan started and raised his head. He saw before him fruits and sweets on a silver salver, and at a little distance, Giribala standing and silently waiting. As soon as he looked up, Giribala, clad all in white in widow's garb, without a single ornament on her person, came and knelt before him, and took the dust of his feet.

She rose and looked at him—so emaciated and pale and broken in health—with her eyes full of sweet sympathy; and tears coursed down her cheeks.

Sashibhushan made an effort to ask her how she was, but could not find words to do so; stifled tears choked his utterance. The *kirtan* singers came and

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stood in front of the house in the course of their
begging round and began to sing over and over
again—

Come back, Beloved, come back !

FALSE HOPES

WHEN I ARRIVED IN DARJEELING the hills were enveloped in a dense mist of dripping cloud. I hardly felt inclined to stir out; I felt even less inclined to stay in. So after lunch, I sauntered forth from my hotel, protected by a mackintosh and a pair of thick boots.

It had stopped drizzling, but nothing was to be seen on any side except a smudge of mist, as though the rain-god had been rubbing out the landscape. I strolled along, pacing to and fro on the Calcutta Road, feeling thoroughly upset at this enforced sojourn in impalpable cloudland, pining for the touch of Mother Earth with her manifold charm of colour and sound, longing to cling to her with all my five senses.

Of a sudden I became aware of an indistinct sound, like a woman crying. In this world of grief and sorrow, there was nothing so strange about this and, elsewhere, I might not have given it a second thought; but, surrounded by this illimitable vagueness, it somehow seemed to me to voice the very plaint of the world that had been obliterated, and I could not treat it cavalierly.

I followed the direction of the sound, to come upon a woman garbed in an ascetic's ochre robe, her tawny, matted locks drawn up in a knot over

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her head, seated on a slab of stone by the roadside, sobbing softly to herself. Hers did not seem a recent sorrow, but rather the deep-seated desolation of a wearied soul, welling up at length in the privacy behind this curtain of cloud.

Like the beginning of a regular romance, thought I. A *sannyasini* weeping on a mountain top, is a sight I never expected to see with these eyes of mine. I could not make out to what province she belonged; so, availing myself of the kindly Hindustani language, I inquired: "What is the matter?"

She gave me, through the mist, a glance out of her tear-laden eyes, but said nothing.

"Have no fear of me," I assured her. "I am a gentleman."

At which, with a little laugh, she said in the purest Urdu: "I have long ceased to know what fear is, nor have I any shame left. There was a time, Babu-ji, when to enter the seclusion of my apartments, my own brother would have had to take permission. To-day I stand unveiled before the world."

At first I felt rather annoyed. Accoutred in correct Anglo-Indian fashion as I was, what business had the wretched woman to take me for a Babu? Let the story end here, I resolved. I decided to depart in wounded dignity, like a lordly locomotive, puffing out cigarette smoke. But my curiosity got the better of me. I stiffened my neck,

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as I asked with condescending *hauteur*: "Where are you from? Do you want any help of me?"

She fixed a calm gaze on my face for a while, and then came out with: "I am the daughter of Nawab Gholam Kader Khan, of Badraon."

Never had I heard of any place called Badraon, or known of any Nawab named Gholam Kader Khan; what kind of misfortune could have made the daughter of such a far-distant Nawab sit weeping by a Darjeeling road, dressed as a Hindu ascetic, I had not the least notion; nor was I prepared to believe all this. But, thought I, let me not spoil the story; it is getting interesting.

With a profound *salaam*, I said with becoming gravity: "I beg you will forgive me, Bibi-saheb, for being unable to recognize you."

Of course there were a thousand and one reasons sufficing to excuse this inability; for one thing, I had never seen her before; for another, one could hardly recognize one's own limbs in that confounded mist. Anyhow, she appeared to extend her indulgence to me, obviously mollified, as she motioned me to another stone near by, saying: "Be seated, please."

She evidently knew how to command. And I must confess to being elated with a sense of high honour at this gracious permission to sit on that damp, knobby, slippery stone, in the august presence of Nur-un-nesa, or Meher-un-nesa, or perhaps Nur-ul-mulk—whatever her name might

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have been—the daughter of the Nawab of Badraon! The possibility of so magnificent an experience I could not have dreamt of when starting out mackintosh-clad from the hotel.

I pursued my inquiry, after I had gingerly assumed a sitting posture: “May I be told, Bibi-saheb, what has brought you to this pass?”

She struck her forehead with the palm of her hand. “How am I to know,” said she, “who brings about these things?—Who has allowed this flimsy vapour to wipe out the whole expanse of these ponderous Himalayas?”

“Quite so, quite so,” I hastened to agree. “Worms that we are, ’tis not for us to question the decrees of Fate.”

I would not have let the Bibi-saheb off so lightly, but for the difficulty that my Hindustani, picked up from up-country servants, was utterly unequal to a philosophical discussion on destiny and free will, couched in polite language fit for the delicate ears of the daughter of a Nawab,—as her own polished phrases made me only too painfully realize.

Said the Bibi-saheb: “The strange story of my life has come to an end this very day, here, in this same Darjeeling. Should it be your pleasure, I will tell you of it.”

“My pleasure!” I protested. “If you be pleased to condescend so far, it would pour balm on the ears of your anxious servant.”

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Let it not be imagined that I actually said all this. It must be taken as what I struggled, but miserably failed, to express. When the Nawab's daughter spoke, it seemed like emerald fields of ripening corn gently waving in the morning breeze ; while I, like a clumsy barbarian, replied brokenly, with crude, disjointed words, lacking in the most elementary forms of common courtesy.

She began her story. "In the veins of my father's people flowed the blood of the Moghal Emperors. So high was our lineage, it proved difficult, when I came of age, to find a suitable bridegroom for me. At length, when my father was considering a proposal for my hand on behalf of the Nawab of Lucknow, the sepoy people broke out in mutiny against their English masters, and all Hindustan was darkened with the smoke of gunfire."

This was the first time I had ever heard high-flown Urdu spoken by a woman, a cultured woman, and it was borne in upon me that this was indeed a language fit for the Nawabs and Amirs of old, but hardly in keeping with these days of railways, telegraphs and bustling business. As it flowed from the Bibi-saheb's lips, it conjured up for me towering marble palaces, gaily-bedecked prancing steeds with flowing manes and tails, stately elephants bearing richly decorated *howdahs*, streets gay with the many-coloured turbans, the gold-worked curly-nosed shoes of the citizens and the flashing curved scimitars of the soldiers—an

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ample leisure, flowing robes, endless ceremonial etiquette.

The Nawab's daughter continued her narrative. "Our fort was on the bank of the Jumna. The captain of our forces was a Hindu Brahmin. His name was Kesharlal."

Into that name, Kesharlal, she seemed to pour out, in one moment, all the music that is stored in a woman's voice. I settled myself down on my stone seat and sat up 'straight, all attention, letting my walking stick slide to the ground.

"Kesharlal was a devout Hindu. Every morning, at dawn, I used to look on him, through my little window, taking a purificatory immersion, standing in the water of the Jumna up to his breast, his joined hands uplifted in salutation to the rising sun. He would then finish his prayers, seated on the upper bathing steps in his wet clothes, before he wended his way home, singing hymns of praise.

"Born though I was in a Muslim family I had never heard a word about our own religion nor was I taught to go through its devotional practices ; for, all around me, reigned license, dissipation and self-indulgence. But, perhaps because God had endowed me with a natural bent for religion, or for some other reason I cannot divine, these daily devotions of Kesharlal, on the alabaster steps leading down to the tranquil, blue waters of the Jumna, amidst the peace of the dawn of the first rays of the sun, filled my freshly awakened mind

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with an unutterable, overflowing worship. The slim, youthful, fair-complexioned figure of Kesharlal seemed to me like a pure-burning, smokeless flame. The religious fervour of the Hindu youth melted the untutored mind of the Muslim girl in an ecstasy of devotion.

"I had for companion a Hindu slave-girl of my own age. She used to go forth each morning to do him reverence, taking the dust of his feet as he rose from his prayers to walk homewards—a sight that gave me joy, and also made me jealous. On Hindu festival days, this girl would invite Brahmins and tender them ceremonial gifts. I once asked her to invite Kesharlal, offering to give her the money for some present worthy of him. But she bit the end of her tongue—a gesture dismissing this profane suggestion. 'He never demeans himself by accepting ceremonial offerings,' she said.

"Thus deprived of any way of showing my reverence, directly or indirectly, my heart's hunger remained unsatisfied. One of my ancestors had married a captive Brahmin maiden. It was her blood I felt coursing through my veins, as I spent my days in the seclusion of our *zenana*; and the thought of this blood connexion with Kesharlal gave me some relief.

"From my companion I learnt all about the Hindu religion—its gods and goddesses, its social rules and customs; and repeatedly heard wonderful stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata;

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till my mind was filled with the picture of a glorious Hindu world—its gorgeous images ; its rich variety of worship with conch-blast, gong and bell, lamps and flowers and incense ; the magical powers of its *sannyasins* ; the superhuman austerity of its Brahmins ; the marvellous deeds of its god-men, the *Avatars*,—seeming to me like the enchanted castle of some fairy tale, through the vaulted chambers of which my soul flitted about, like a bird that had lost its nest.

“Then broke out the Sepoy Mutiny, and its disturbing waves dashed into our fort, invading our very *zenana*. ‘Now is the time,’ declared Kesharlal, ‘to get rid of these foul-feeding Whiteskins ; afterwards it will be for us, Hindus and Muslims, to have a great gamble for place and power in this Hindustan of ours!’

“But my father, the Khan-saheb, was a cautious man. Delivering himself of a string of uncomplimentary epithets against the white-skinned usurpers, he said: ‘There is nothing on earth these people cannot do. It is not possible for us of Hindustan to cope with them. I will not risk my little kingdom in the vain hope of uncertain possibilities, by joining the insurgents.’

“At a time when the blood of all Hindustan was boiling, this cool, calculating attitude of my father revolted us all. Even my mother and step-mothers, the *Begums*, became restive.

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"Thereupon Kesharlal turned up at the head of his troops, and said to my father: 'Look here, Nawab-saheb, if you refuse to join us, you will be a prisoner in your room till the business is done. Meanwhile I shall take charge of this fort'. 'Oh nonsense', laughed my father. 'No drastic measures for me! I am with you right enough'. 'I shall require money from the treasury,' said Kesharlal. My father handed him a trifle, as he promised: 'I will pay out more as it is actually needed'.

"I had a profusion of valuable ornaments for every part of my body, from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes. I made a bundle of these and sent them by the hand of the slave-girl to Kesharlal. He was pleased to accept them; and every one of my limbs, thus bared of adornment, tingled with gladness.

"Kesharlal was busy cleaning up the rusted swords and firearms stored in the fort, when suddenly one afternoon the English commander of the district marched in with his red-coats, covering the whole place with the dust they raised. My father had betrayed his followers!

"Kesharlal had such wonderful influence over our men, they all resolved to die fighting. As for me, to stay on under my treacherous father's roof would have been like living in hell. My heart was bursting with sorrow, shame and repugnance, but never a tear escaped my eyes. I left the fort, dressed in

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the clothes of my coward of a brother, there being none in that uproar to pay heed to my doings.

"The dust and smoke, the cracking of the guns and the cries of the combatants, filling earth and sky, had subsided into the dread stillness of death. The sun had set, reddening the water of the Jumna with the colour of blood. And the moon, nearly at its full, now shone over the scene.

"At any other time, my heart would have been racked with grief and compassion at the ghastly sights that met my eyes. But I wandered round and round the battle field, like one walking in sleep, looking for Kesharlal,—so full of this one object that everything else became trivial. I sought and sought, till at last, near midnight, the bright moonlight revealed two figures lying side by side, in a mango grove by the river: one was Kesharlal, the other his devoted lieutenant, Deoki. They must have dragged themselves, wounded to death, to breathe their last in this secluded spot.

"The first thing I did was to allay the pangs of my long unsatisfied reverence, by letting down my hair and wiping with it the grime off his feet. The coolness of his lotus-feet I then placed against my fevered brow, and as I kissed them, my pent-up tears at last streamed forth. Whereupon a slight tremor passed through Kesharlal's body, and a feeble moan escaped his lips. I released his feet with a start, and heard him try to articulate, with closed eyes: 'Water!'

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"Off I rushed to the river, and returned with my saturated scarf, which I wrung over his parted lips. I then cleansed and bandaged the wound which had nearly destroyed one of his eyes. Fetching another supply I assiduously bathed his face and neck, till Kesharlal gradually regained consciousness.

" 'Shall I bring you more water?' I asked. 'Who are you?' he inquired. 'Your humble devotee,' I replied, and could not help adding: 'daughter of the Nawab, Gholam Kader Khan.' It had been my hope that on this, his last journey, Kesharlal would carry with him my offering of devotion, and I would be left with a joy of which none could ever deprive me.

"But he sat up with a violent effort, crying: 'Begone! Infidel daughter of a faithless father. Dare you defile my caste at the moment of death?' and dealt me a blow between the eyes, making me reel back, almost fainting."

"The beast!" I ejaculated.

My unsmoked cigarette remained clutched between my fingers, as I had been tensely listening, with no word, not a movement of interruption. At this point I was unable to contain myself.

"Who is a beast?" flared up the Nawab's daughter. "Does a beast refuse water in the agony of death?"

"I beg your pardon," I apologized. "I meant to say 'divinity'."

"What divinity?" she exclaimed again. "Does a divinity reject a devotee's heart-felt worship?"

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"Quite so, quite so," I was reduced to mutter, as I relapsed into silence.

The Bibi-saheb went on with her story. "At first I felt hurt to the very core. It seemed as if the heavens and all the world had crashed over my head. The next moment, however, I came to my senses, and saluted from a distance this embodiment of Brahminhood, saying within myself: 'O purest of the pure! You accept nothing from outside, neither the service of the undeserving, nor the largesse of the self-seeking, nor the love of woman. Aloof, ever unsullied, unapproachably distant!—unworthy am I even as a sacrifice for such as you.'

"What Kesharlal thought, to see the Nawab's daughter make him the obeisance of the eight-fold prostration, I know not, for his features remained expressionless. He impassively looked on my face; then he made a shift to rise. I hurriedly took a step forward to offer him a helping hand, but he ignored my gesture. Struggling up, somehow, unaided, he tottered off to the bathing steps. There a small ferry-boat was tied to its post. Into this he managed to clamber and, loosing the rope, to push it out into the current.

"The boat floated away with him, slowly fading into the distance, till it passed out of my sight. How my whole being yearned and strained to dedicate the burden of its heart, the burden of its youth, the burden of its unclaimed worship, in

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one last salutation to him who had thus vanished into the unknown ; and then, in the stillness of this night of nights, to merge its frustrated life, like a flower untimely plucked from its stem, in the limpid depths of the Jumna, swooning under the caress of the moonlight! . . . But I could not. That frail bark with its frail burden, invisibly borne along the unruffled stream, called me away from the longed-for embrace of death, back to life."

Here her words came to a stop, as she went off into a reverie. I did not disturb her.

After a time the Nawab's daughter broke the silence. "In these last few days," said she, "I have learnt that there is nothing impossible for man, nothing of which man is incapable.

"You might think, Babu-ji, that for a girl who had never left her own chamber, the outside world would prove too difficult. But there you would be wrong. Once out in the open, a way is always to be found—not the way of the Nawabs, but along which men have gone on for ever ; beset with every kind of obstacle of joy and sorrow, endlessly complicated with diverging branches of every variety, but nevertheless a way. How the Nawab's daughter trod it, all by herself ; the buffetings of sorrow, travail and contumely she encountered, and yet desisted not from her quest—the story of all this is a tangled skein, which would hardly interest you even if I tried to straighten it out, nor am I in the mood to attempt it.

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"I was all the time on fire. And, like a rocket, the more I burned, the farther I sped. While I was speeding I did not feel the burning. To-day the brilliant flame of that supreme striving, with its depths of sorrow, its heights of joy, has been quenched, dropping me here on the roadside, spent and lifeless. My journey is ended ; and with it my story."

Here she stopped again. But I inwardly shook my head. No, thought I, here this story cannot have its end. So, after allowing her a short pause, I ventured: "If you will excuse this impertinence, Bibi-saheb, your servant's distress of mind would be greatly relieved if he be told the end of the story a little more clearly."

The Nawab's daughter laughed. My broken Hindustani, I could see, had its effect. Had my diction been faultless, she could never have come to the point of baring the secret of her heart. But my unfamiliarity with her mother-tongue served as a screen between us.

She took up the thread of her narrative. "I used to get news of Kesharlal every now and then, but could never manage to get within sight of him. He was skirmishing about with the insurgents, now here now there, making thunderous onslaughts, disappearing like a streak of lightning.

"I dressed myself as a Hindu neophyte, and took initiation from Swami Shivanand of Benares. News from all over the country found its way to his feet,

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and there I sat, reverently receiving his instruction in Hindu shastric lore, while also anxiously gathering news of the mutiny, till at length I learnt of its being stamped out under the heels of the conquering English. The brave leading spirits, of whose gallant deeds tidings had been reaching us in flashes, receded into the limbo of darkness. And nothing further was heard of Kesharlal.

"I could bear it no longer. I left Benares and took the road again. From shrine to shrine, from temple to temple I wandered, but could find no trace of Kesharlal. Some who knew him by reputation said he must have been killed, either on the battle field, or by his captors. But my heart said: 'Never! Kesharlal cannot die. The flame of Brahminhood cannot go out. He must be waiting, in some unknown, inaccessible place, for the consummation of my self-immolation.'

"We are told in the Hindu scriptures of Sudras becoming Brahmins; true, there is no mention of Muslims becoming Brahmins, but that is simply because then there were no Muslims. I knew that it would take long before I could be united with Kesharlal, because before that I would have to attain Brahminhood. And in that endeavour, one by one, uncounted years passed by. At length, within and without, in word and thought, in feeling and action, a Brahmin I became, justifying the blood of the Brahmin ancestress which flowed in my veins. And established, at length, in the status of that

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first Brahmin of the beginning of my youth, that last Brahmin of the end of my youth, that only Brahmin for me in all the world, I shone in the radiance of conscious attainment.

"I had listened, enthralled, to ever so many stories of Kesharlal's daring exploits during the course of the mutiny, but what remained engraved on my memory was the picture of him floating away on that moonlit night, alone in the little boat, silently borne along by the current of the Jumna ; and, ever since, I have had visions of his austere figure irresistibly drawn towards some grand mystery, with no companion, none to minister to him, nor wanting any, self-sufficient, self-illuminated, moon and stars gazing on him in silent wonder.

"At last I happened to hear that he had escaped from the vengeance of his victors and found refuge in Nepal. To Nepal I accordingly hied ; and, after a long search there, I came to learn that it was some time since he had wandered away eastwards, through the hills, whither no one could say.

"Since then I have been in this part of the Himalayas, by no means a place for Hindus ; for, with these Bhutia and Lepcha people, their gods, rites, manners and customs, everything is different. I began to be alarmed for my Brahminic purity, the fruit of life-long striving, lest it should be the least bit tainted, and I took the most severe pains to keep myself safe from contamination. For I had a

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feeling that my ship was nearing its harbour, that the fulfilment of my life could not be far off.

"What am I to tell you of the end? The last is the shortest part of my tale. It takes but one puff to blow out the light; why make a long story about it? At the close of the best part of my life, after I arrived in Darjeeling this morning, I got sight of Kesharlal."

She stopped.

In my impatience I bluntly blurted out: "Where, how did you find him?"

"I found him in the Bhutia quarters, with his slovenly Bhutia wife and her children around him, unkempt, uncleanly clad, seated in a squalid yard, shelling peas."

Her story was really at an end.

A word of consolation seemed to be called for, so I made bold to remark: "We must make allowances for a fugitive from pursuing vengeance during so many years. He could hardly be expected to keep up, through it all, his Brahminic niceties."

"That I know well enough!" snapped the Nawab's daughter. "But it is of myself I have been thinking, of the incomprehensible illusion that has haunted and hunted me about all this time! Did I ever know, could I ever suspect, that this Spirit of Brahminhood, which had captured my woman's heart at the moment of its first unfolding, was but a matter of tradition, of blind habit? To me it

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had appeared as *Dharma*—immemorial, everlasting Truth. How else could I have accepted as the benign touch of initiation so dire an insult at the hand of the Brahmin, in return for the tremulous offer of worship of my newly-blossoming body and soul?

“Alas, O Brahmin, so easily have you discarded one set of daily practices to take up another set, but how am I to replace the life, the youth, I have wasted?”

The woman rose from her seat. “*Namaskar Babu-ji!*” she said by way of bidding me good-bye in the Hindu way. The next moment she corrected herself, saying “*Salaam Babu-saheb!*” in Muslim fashion, as good-bye for ever to the ruins of her Brahminhood, which fate had so cruelly razed to the dust. And before I could make any reply, she had vanished into the Himalayan mist.

There I remained seated, with closed eyes, musing and musing. Pictures rose before me: first of a pile of cloth-of-gold cushions by the little window opening over the Jumna, on which reclined at ease a youthful figure of sweet sixteen, the Nawab’s child, looking out with single-minded fascination, as gazes a girl-devotee, during the vesper worship, on the illuminated image of her divinity; and then of the despairing, middle-aged ascetic, enveloped in mist, sitting heart-broken with her illusions dispelled by the side of this Calcutta Road of Darjeeling; and the music of the meeting

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of two opposite currents of Brahmin and Muslim blood in the body of a sensitive, high-strung woman, kept rippling through my mind, in perfectly-spoken mellifluous Urdu accents, for how long I cannot say.

When I opened my eyes, it was to find the clouds dissipated, and bright sunshine filling the pure blue depths of the mountain sky. English men and women on horseback and in rickshaws, as well as Bengali clerks muffled in their comforters, were passing by—they all seemed to stare at me curiously.

I sprang to my feet. In this naked world of revealing sunlight, that fantastic story no longer seemed true. I cannot even swear that it was not a figment of my own imagination, born of mingled mist and cigarette smoke,—that the fort on the Jumna, the Muslim-Brahmin damsel, and the devout, austere, dare-devil mutineer, were not all hallucination.

THE JUDGE

WHEN AFTER MANY TURNS OF FORTUNE, Kshiroda, now past her youth, got another man to give her shelter, he too discarded her like a tattered cloak. Bitterly she felt the humiliation. Once more she had to seek a new patron for a mere handful of rice.

Like the autumn, there comes at youth's end a mellow and gracious period when life's fruit and the ripe corn are ready in an atmosphere of beautiful serenity. Our foundations have been laid secure, more or less ; the inner personality has been developed through sorrows and happiness in a world where evil as well as good have shaped our character ; we have, by this time, withdrawn our desires from the realm of enchantment lying beyond our reach, and established them within the confines of our powers. The dazzled eyes of new love can no longer be attracted, but we become dearer to those who have known us. While the lustre of youth slowly fades, the ageless inner self becomes more manifest in one's face and eyes after long dwelling as it were in the same habitation ; the smile, the glance full of expression, the distinctive voice are transfused and blended with the man who lives within. We have ceased hoping for things which eluded our grasp ; now we no longer

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mourn for those who have left us ; but there are some who are still near, who love us, and we cleave to them as belonging to a small intimate nest that has been left unbroken by the storms and stresses of life. Tested by experience, completely trusted, they remain close to our heart in an atmosphere where strivings and desire have yielded to a secure sense of fulfilment. In that tender afternoon of one's life, when the time has come for calm enjoyment, there can be nothing more tragic than the compulsion to begin it all anew : the round of new contacts, new acquisition, futile efforts to establish new ties, and a weary unending quest for assurances. Sad is the lot of a person for whom no bed has been prepared for rest, for whom the evening lamp has not been lit to welcome the traveller back to home.

Kshiroda, now nearly middle-aged, got up in the morning to find that her lover had fled during the night with all her ornaments, and money. She had nothing left for paying the house-rent, not even the means to buy milk for her three-year-old son. Suddenly she realized that in the thirty-eight years of her life she had not been able to make a single person her own, that there was not a home in which she could claim a corner to live or to die in. Again, to-day, she would have to wipe her tears and put collyrium on her eyelids, she must colour her lips and cheeks with red, cover her decayed youth with false allure, and with the utmost patience and persistence set about with a smile to capture new

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hearts. As she thought of this, she could no longer control herself; she shut the door, and falling down on the floor repeatedly knocked her head against it. The whole day she remained thus, lying without food, paralyzed like a person half dead. Evening came: in the lampless room the darkness deepened. And then, as it happened, an old lover came to the house. "Khiro", "Khiro", he called to her, rapping hard at the door. Kshiroda rushed out, broom in hand, a veritable tigress; the amorous youth made himself scarce in no time.

Her son, weeping in the agony of hunger, had at last fallen asleep under the bedstead. Waking up at the noise, he began to cry out "mother, O mother!" in a sobbing, broken voice.

Kshiroda took the crying child and hugged him to her breast, and then with lightning speed she ran to a nearby well and plunged inside.

Neighbours heard the noise and lantern in hand, gathered near the well. Kshiroda and the child were taken out without much delay. Kshiroda was unconscious; the child had died.

Kshiroda recovered gradually in the hospital. The magistrate sent her to the sessions on a charge of murder.

Judge Mohitmohan Dutt was a statutory civilian. He awarded the maximum sentence and condemned Kshiroda to death. The pleaders, deliberating upon the circumstances of the unfortunate

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woman, tried hard to save her, but without success. The Judge would not consider her to be the least deserving of mercy.

There was a reason for his inability to do so. For one thing, he applied the term goddess to all Hindu women, and on the other hand, he thoroughly distrusted all womankind. Women, in his opinion, were ever eager to snap their domestic ties; the least relaxation of discipline, and not a single upper-caste woman would be found in her cage.

And there was a further reason for his action. To know that reason it would be necessary to enter into the tale of his early youth.

When Mohit was in his second year at college, he was quite different from now in style and deportment.

To-day Mohit can boast of a bald head, with a little tuft of sacred hair dangling behind; he is clean-shaven; but at that time he was in his gold spectacles, beard and moustachio, and in his hair-cut à l'Anglaise, a nineteenth century version of the Bengali dandy-god Kartik. Great care he bestowed on his dress, he had no distaste for meat, and he also had a distinct preference for some strong appetizers.

Not far from his place lived a middle-aged gentleman, of moderate means, with a widowed daughter named Hemshashi. She was quite young, being less than fifteen.

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The distant shore, with its dim blue foliage, seems like a vision of beauty, but it is no longer so enchanting when one has landed. From the remote hinterland of her widowhood where she dwelt, the world of relationships that lay beyond appeared like a mysterious garden of delight. That the machinery of the world was complicated and hard, she did not know; neither that it was inextricably bound up with sorrow and travail, with joys and riches as well as with doubt, danger, remorse and hopeless difficulties. To her it seemed that life flowed with ease like a clear, murmurous stream, that all the pathways of the world in front of her were broad, beautiful and straight. All happiness, she thought, waited outside her balcony; it was only in her own poor, fluttering heart, beating softly in its imprisonment, that unfulfilled desires were nourished. The spring breeze had been wafted from end to end of her being, the wide earth was wrapped in a warm haze of beauty. The blue sky, she felt, was aquiver with ripples from her heart, and around its fragrant core the whole universe had opened its petals.

At home she had none but her parents and two brothers younger than herself. These went to school after an early meal; when they returned, they would take their tiffin and again go out to take lessons in a night-school in the neighbourhood. Their father earned a small salary and could not, therefore, afford to keep a private tutor.

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During pauses in her house-work, Hem would come and sit on the lonely balcony in front of her room. With wistful eyes she would gaze at the traffic on the main road ; she heard the shrill plaintive cries of the hawkers as they passed by ; to her it seemed that all the wayfarers were joyous, that even the beggars were free, and that the hawkers were not merely engaged in a hard struggle for livelihood but were happy performers as well in a drama set on the moving stage of life.

And morning, eve, and night she used to see the arrogant, well dressed Mohitmohan walk about with a lofty air. A picture of godlike perfection he appeared to her, blessed with all the gifts that a man could desire. This youth, so elegant and handsome, possessed everything, and everything could be given up to him. The doll is turned into a living person by the girl who plays with it : the young widow invested Mohit with imagined glory, and played with a god of her own making.

Sometimes, in the evening, she would see Mohit's house resplendent with lights ; the jingle of dancing girls, and their resonant singing reached her ears. The whole night she would spend sitting and watching the restless shadows on the floor, her eyes thirsty with desire. Wounded and sick, her heart would beat like a caged bird.

Not that she inwardly chastized or blained her false god for his wild revelries. Like the fire which attracts moths as with the illusion of a star,

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Mohit's room, glowing with lights and with reckless gaiety, had a hypnotic fascination for her ; the song and music created a heavenly mirage. The lights and shadows, the music drifting from the nearby terrace mingled with her own dreams and desires. Hemshashi built up a magic castle in her mind and there, in the intimate loneliness of the night, she placed the idol of her worship. Raptly she would contemplate the idol, and like incense offered at a shrine, burn all her youth, her hours sad and gay, her life here and hereafter, in the flames of resistless desire. Never did she imagine that inside the terraced room, behind the screen of turbulent passions, there gathered the debris of weariness, shame and grime ; that an ugly hunger burned with soul-destroying heat. From her distance, the young widow did not know that a heartless cruelty, with its evil leer and seeking victims, lay behind the sleepless glare of lights.

Thus she would have spent a life-time, wrapped in her dreams of a fake paradise with its tinsel god, but unfortunately the god turned, and the paradise actually touched earth : the heaven disappeared in fragments, and the person who had created it lay shattered in the dust.

Mohit's lustful eyes had fallen on the dazed girl on the balcony, and after sending her many letters under the false signature of "Binod Chandra" he at last got a trembling, hesitating answer full of spelling mistakes and deep sentiment. Days went

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by in a storm of new relationships ; now passionate or hesitant, sometimes in a fit of suspicion, or in wild expectation. The world revolved round the dizzy intoxicated mind of this young widow till it became a shadow and vanished ; and at last, all on a sudden, the poor lost creature was thrown violently away from the spinning world of humanity and flung to a remote distance. It is not necessary to go into details.

Late one night, Hemshashi, leaving her father and mother, her brothers, and her home, got into the same compartment with Mohit who had hidden his identity under a pseudonym. The idol had now come quite near with its clay, and straw, and gilt ornaments—she felt sick already with shame and regret, and was ready to sink to the earth in humiliation.

When at last the train began to move, Hemshashi fell weeping at Mohit's feet and implored him to take her back home. Mohit stopped her mouth with his hand, feeling anxious and irritated ; the train was now speeding away.

Events rush into the memory of a drowning person, the entire past is viewed in a frantic moment ; there, in that dark, closed compartment, Hemshashi had a similar experience. She saw them all—her father, who never sat down to a meal without her ; her youngest brother, who loved to be fed by her hands ; she remembered that her mother and she would prepare the *pan* together in

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the morning, that her mother would dress up her hair in the evening. Every little corner of the home, each detail of the day's work, came to her with familiar brightness. Those daily duties, preparing the *pan*, plaiting the hair, gently plying the hand-fan when her father sat down to eat, plucking his stray grey hairs when he rested on holidays, putting up with the pranks of the brothers—all these seemed to be the rarest happiness, bathed in quiet beauty. She wondered how with all these things in one's life one could ever be in need of other happiness.

All respectable girls, she thought, were now fast asleep in their own homes. She had never realized before how enjoyable was such sleep ; deep, restful sleep in one's room at night. To-morrow the girls would awake in their homes, join their daily duties without hesitation : Hemshashi, now without a home, did not know where the next morning would break for her. And to-morrow, in the unhappy morning, what shame would be revealed, what insults and regrets heaped up. The familiar sunlight would fall on that house far away, in a narrow lane.

Hem wept, in heart-broken agony ; with pathetic beseeching she repeated : "There is night yet, my mother and my little brothers have not got up, do take me back." But her god did not even listen ; charioted in a second-class compartment he took her towards her long-cherished heaven.

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Not long afterwards, the god boarded another worn-out second-class compartment and fled. The woman was left behind neck deep in mire.

Mohitmohan's previous history has been shown in one of its many events. More instances would make the story monotonous.

Even this episode, with "Binod Chandra" as its hero, would hardly be remembered by any person. Mohit is now a puritan, observing all Hindu rites and using sacred Ganges water ; much of his time is spent in scriptural discussions. His small sons he is training up in the Yogic system ; the women of his household are sternly ruled and protected in the *zenana* where the sun and moon and the open air are denied admittance. Having been guilty towards more than one woman, he nowadays offers the severest punishment to any woman who may be guilty of the slightest social error.

A day or two after condemning Kshiroda to death, Mohit, who liked fresh vegetables, had gone to the jail garden to make his own collection. Kshiroda's case came to his mind, and he felt a curiosity to walk over and find out whether the woman was now penitent, remembering the sins of her evil past. He entered the women's section of the prison.

From a distance he could hear the noise of a quarrel. Entering the room he saw that Kshiroda had started an altercation with the warder. Such

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indeed is the nature of women, Mohit thought, laughing to himself. Even before imminent death they could not stop quarrelling ; they would probably carry it on in hell with death's own messengers.

Proper advice and reprimand, Mohit decided, should be administered at once to make her penitent. With this righteous intent, he went up to Kshiroda, but she cried out on seeing him. "Judge-babu", she wailed, "I beseech you, tell him to give me back my ring!"

Kshiroda, he found on enquiry, had hidden a ring in her hair ; the warder had seen it by chance and snatched it away.

Again Mohit laughed to himself. Only a day more and she would be hanged, and yet she doted on this ring—jewellery is everything to women!

On his demand, the warder handed over the ring to him.

Turning the ring over in his hand, he started violently, as if he had touched burning coal. On one side there was a miniature portrait of a young man done in oil on its ivory inset ; on the other side embossed in gold were the letters "Binod Chandra".

Mohit now stopped gazing at the ring and looked full into Kshiroda's face. Another face emerged from twenty-four years ago ; a tearful face, soft with love, shy and timorous. There was unmistakable resemblance.

Again Mohit looked at the gold ring and when

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he raised his eyes the guilty, fallen woman in front of him was invested with a halo of gold: the little ring had turned her into the shining image of divine womanhood.

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THEY MET TOGETHER IN A RUINED TEMPLE on the river bank: Mahamaya and Rajib.

In silence she cast her naturally grave look at Rajib with a tinge of reproach. It meant to say: "How durst you call me here at this unusual hour to-day? You have ventured to do it only because I have so long obeyed you in all things!"

Rajib had a little awe of Mahamaya at all times, and now this look of hers thoroughly upset him: he at once gave up his fondly conceived plan of making a set speech to her. And yet he had to give quickly some reason for this interview. So, he hurriedly blurted out, "I say, let us run away from this place and marry." True, Rajib thus delivered himself of what he had had in his mind; but the preface he had silently composed was lost. His speech sounded very dry and bald—even absurd. He himself felt confused after saying it, and had no power left in him to add some words to modify its effect. The fool! After calling Mahamaya to that ruined temple by the river side at midday, he could only tell her "Come, let us marry!"

Mahamaya was a *kulin's* daughter, twenty-four years old—in the full bloom of her youth and beauty, like an image of pure gold, of the hue of

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the early autumn sunlight ; radiant and still as that sunshine, with a gaze free and fearless as daylight itself.

She was an orphan. Her elder brother, Bhavanicharan Chattopadhyay, looked after her. The two were of the same mould—taciturn, but possessing a force of character which burnt silently like the midday sun. People feared Bhavanicharan without knowing why.

Rajib had come there from afar with the Burra Sahib of the silk factory of the place. His father had served this Sahib, and when he died, the Sahib undertook to bring up his orphan boy and took him with himself to this Bamanhati factory. In those early days such instances of sympathy were frequent among the Sahibs. The boy was accompanied by his loving aunt, and they lived in Bhavanicharan's neighbourhood. Mahamaya was Rajib's playmate in childhood, and was dearly loved by his aunt.

Rajib grew up to be sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and even nineteen ; and yet, in spite of his aunt's constant urging, he refused to marry. The Sahib was highly pleased to hear of this uncommon instance of good sense in a Bengali youth, and imagined that Rajib had taken him as his ideal in life. I may here add that the Sahib was a bachelor. The aunt died soon after.

For Mahamaya, too, no bridegroom of an equal grade of blue blood could be secured except

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for an impossible dowry. She steadily grew up in maidenhood.

The reader hardly needs to be told that though the god who ties the marriage-knot had so long been ignoring this young couple, the god who forms the bond of love had not been idle all this time. While old Prajapati was dozing, young Kandarpa was very much awake.

Kandarpa's influence shows itself differently in different persons. Under his inspiration Rajib constantly sought for a chance of whispering his heart's longings, but Mahamaya never gave him such an opportunity ; her silent and grave look sent a chill of fear through the wild heart of Rajib.

To-day he had, by a hundred solemn entreaties and conjurations, at last succeeded in bringing her to this ruined temple. He had planned that he would to-day freely tell her all that he had to say and thereafter there would be for him either life-long happiness or death in life. Yet at this crisis of his fate Rajib could only say, "Come, let us go and marry", and then he stood confused and silent like a boy who had forgotten his lesson.

For a long while she did not reply, as if she had never expected such a proposal from Rajib.

The noontide has many undefined plaintive notes of its own ; these began to make themselves heard in the midst of that stillness. The broken door of the temple, half detached from its hinge, began at times to open and to close in the wind

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with a low wailing creak. The pigeon, perched on the temple window, began its deep booming. The wood-pecker kept up its monotonous noise as it sat working on the *shimul* branch outside. The lizard darted through the heaps of dry leaves with a rustling sound. A sudden gust of warm wind blowing from the fields passed through the trees, making all their foliage whistle. Of a sudden the river waters woke into ripple and lapped on the broken steps of the *ghat*. Amidst these stray, languid sounds came the rustic notes of a cow-boy's flute from a far-off tree-shade. Rajib stood reclining against the ruinous plinth of the temple like a tired dreamer, gazing at the river ; he had not the spirit to look Mahamaya in the face.

After a while he turned his head and again cast a supplicating glance at Mahamaya's face. She shook her head and replied, "No, it can't be."

At once the whole fabric of his hopes was dashed to the ground ; for he knew that when Mahamaya shook her head it was through her own convictions, and nobody else in the world could bend her to his own will. The high pride of pedigree had run in the blood of Mahamaya's family for untold generations—could she ever consent to marry a Brahmin of low pedigree like Rajib? To love is one thing, and to marry quite another. She, however, now realized that her own thoughtless conduct in the past had encouraged

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Rajib to hope so audaciously ; and at once she prepared to leave the temple.

Rajib understood her, and quickly broke in with "I am leaving these parts to-morrow."

At first she thought of appearing indifferent to the news ; but she could not. Her feet did not move when she wanted to depart. Calmly she asked, "Why?" Rajib replied, "My Sahib has been transferred from here to the Sonapur factory, and he is taking me with him." Again she stood in long silence, musing thus: 'Our lives are moving in two contrary directions. I cannot hope to keep a man a prisoner of my eyes for ever.' So she opened her compressed lips a little and said, "Very well." It sounded rather like a deep sigh.

With this word only she was again about to leave, when Rajib started up with the whisper "your brother!"

She looked out and saw her brother coming towards the temple, and she knew that he had found out their assignation. Rajib, fearing to place Mahamaya in a false position, tried to escape by jumping out of the hole in the temple wall ; but Mahamaya seized his arm and kept him back by main force. Bhavanicharan entered the temple, and only cast one silent and placid glance at the pair.

Mahamaya looked at Rajib and said with an unruffled voice, "Yes, I will go to your house, Rajib. Do you wait for me."

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Silently Bhavanicharan left the temple, and Mahamaya followed him as silently. And Rajib? He stood in a maze as if he had been doomed to death.

2

That very night Bhavanicharan gave a crimson silk *sari* to Mahamaya and told her to put it on at once. Then he said, "Follow me". Nobody had ever disobeyed Bhavanicharan's bidding or even his hint ; Mahamaya herself was no exception to it.

That night the two walked to the burning-place on the river-bank, not far from their home. There in the hut for sheltering dying men brought to the holy river's side, an old Brahmin was lying in expectation of death. The two went up to his bedside. A Brahmin priest was present in one corner of the room ; Bhavanicharan beckoned to him. The priest quickly got his things ready for the happy ceremony. Mahamaya realized that she was to be married to this dying man, but she did not make the least objection. In the dim room, faintly lit up by the glare of two funeral pyres hard by, the muttered sacred texts mingled with the groans of the dying as Mahamaya's marriage was celebrated.

The day following her marriage she became a widow. But she did not feel excessively grieved at the bereavement. And Rajib, too, was not so

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crushed by the news of her widowhood as he had been by the unexpected tidings of her marriage. Nay, he felt rather cheered. But this feeling did not last long. A second terrible blow laid him utterly in the dust ; he heard that there was a grand ceremony at the burning *ghat* that day as Mahamaya was going to burn herself with her husband's corpse.

At first he thought of informing his Sahib and forcibly stopping the cruel sacrifice with his help. But then he recollected that the Sahib had made over charge and left for Sonapur that very day ; he had wanted to take Rajib with him, but the youth had stayed behind on a month's leave.

Mahamaya had told him "Wait for me". This request he must by no means disregard. He had at first taken a month's leave, but if need were he would take two months', then three months' leave and finally throw up the Sahib's service and live by begging, yet he would wait for her to his life's close.

Just when Rajib was going to rush out madly and commit suicide or some other terrible deed, a deluge of rain came down with a desolating storm at sunset. The tempest threatened to tumble his house down on his head. He gained some composure when he found that the convulsion in outer nature was harmonizing with the storm within his soul. It seemed to him that all Nature had taken up his cause and was going to bring him some sort

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of remedy. The force he wished to apply in his own person but could not was now being applied by Nature herself over earth and sky.

At such a time some one pushed the door hard from outside. Rajib hastened to open it. A woman entered the room, clad in a wet garment, with a long veil covering her entire face. Rajib at once knew her for Mahamaya.

In a voice full of emotion he asked, "Mahamaya, have you come away from the funeral pyre?"

She replied, "Yes, I had promised you to come to your house. Here I am, to keep my word. But, Rajib, I am not exactly the same person ; I am changed altogether. I am the Mahamaya of old in my mind only. Speak now, I can yet go back to the funeral pyre. But if you swear never to draw my veil aside, never to look on my face, then I shall live in your house."

It was enough to get her back from the hand of Death ; all other considerations vanished before it. Rajib promptly replied, "Live here in any fashion you like ; if you leave me I shall die."

Mahamaya said, "Then come away at once. Let us go where your Sahib has gone on transfer."

Abandoning all his property in that house, Rajib went forth into the midst of the storm with Mahamaya. The force of the wind made it hard for them to stand erect ; the gravel driven by the wind pricked their limbs like buck shot. The two took to the open fields, lest the trees by the road-

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side should crash down on their heads. The violence of the wind struck them from behind, as if the tempest had torn the couple asunder from human habitations and was blowing them away on to destruction.

3

The reader must not discredit my tale as false or supernatural. There are traditions of a few such occurrences having taken place in the days when the burning of widows was customary.

Mahamaya had been bound hand and foot and placed on the funeral pyre, to which fire was applied at the appointed time. The flames had shot up from the pile, when a violent storm and rainshower began. Those who had come to conduct the cremation quickly fled for refuge to the hut for dying men and shut the door. The rain put the funeral fire out in no time. Meantime the bands on Mahamaya's wrists had been burnt to ashes, setting her hands free. Without uttering a groan amidst the intolerable pain of burning, she sat up and untied her feet. Then wrapping round herself her partly burnt cloth, she rose half-naked from the pyre, and first came to her own house. There was no one there ; all had gone to the burning *ghat*. She lighted a lamp, put on a fresh cloth, and looked at her face in a glass. Dashing the mirror down on the ground, she

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mused for a while. Then she drew a long veil over her face and went to Rajib's house which was hard by. The reader knows what happened next.

True, Mahamaya now lived in Rajib's house, but there was no joy in his life. It was not much, but only a simple veil that parted the one from the other. And yet that veil was eternal like death, but more agonizing than death itself; because despair in time deadens the pang of death's separation, while a living hope was being daily and hourly crushed by the separation which that veil caused.

For one thing there was a spirit of motionless silence in Mahamaya from of old; and now the hush from within the veil appeared doubly unbearable. She seemed to be living within a winding sheet of death. This silent death clasped the life of Rajib and daily seemed to shrivel it up. He lost the Mahamaya whom he had known of old, and at the same time this veiled figure ever sitting by his side silently prevented him from enshrining in his life the sweet memory of her as she was in her girlhood. He brooded: 'Nature has placed barrier enough between one human being and another. Mahamaya, in particular, has been born, like Karna of old, with a natural charm against all evil. There is an innate fence round her being. And now she seems to have been born a second time and come to me with a second line of fences round herself. Ever by my side, she yet has become so remote as to be no longer within my

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reach. I am sitting outside the inviolable circle of her magic and trying, with an unsatiated thirsty soul, to penetrate this thin but unfathomable mystery, as the stars wear out the hours night after night in the vain attempt to pierce the mystery of the dark Night with their sleepless winkless downcast gaze.'

Long did these two companionless lonely creatures thus pass their days together.

One night, on the tenth day of the new moon, the clouds withdrew for the first time in that rainy season, and the moon showed herself. The motionless moonlit night seemed to be sitting in a vigil by the head of the sleeping world. That night Rajib too had quitted his bed and sat gazing out of his window. From the heat-oppressed woodland a peculiar scent and the lazy hum of the cricket were entering into his room. As he gazed, the sleeping tank by the dark rows of trees glimmered like a polished silver plate. It is hard to say whether man at such a time thinks any clearly defined thought. Only his heart rushes in a particular direction,—it sends forth an effusion of odour like the woodland, it utters a cricket hum like the night. What Rajib was thinking of I know not ; but it seemed to him that that night all the old laws had been set aside ; that day the rainy season's night had drawn aside her veil of clouds, and this night looked silent, beautiful and grave like the Mahamaya of those early days. All the currents

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of his being flowed impetuously together towards *that* Mahamaya.

Like one moving in a dream, Rajib entered Mahamaya's bedroom. She was asleep then.

He stood by her side and stooped down to gaze on her. The moonbeams had fallen on her face. But, Oh horror! where was that face known of old? The flame of the funeral pyre, with its ruthless greedy tongue, had utterly licked away a part of the beauty from the left cheek of Mahamaya and left there only the ravages of its hunger.

Did Rajib start? Did a muffled cry escape from his lips? Probably so. Mahamaya woke up with a start—and saw Rajib before her. At once she replaced her veil and stood erect, leaving her bed. Rajib knew that the thunderbolt was uplifted. He fell down before her—he clasped her feet, crying “forgive me!”

She answered not a word, she did not look back for a moment as she walked out of the room. She never came back. No trace of her was found anywhere. The silent fire of her anger at that unforgiving eternal parting left all the remaining days of Rajib's life branded with a long scar.

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STANDING BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD one morning a little boy laid a wager with another little boy about a deed that required exceptional prowess. The subject-matter of the argument was whether they could gather flowers from the honeysuckle creeper that grew in the *Thakur-bari*. One of the boys said: "Of course, I can," whilst the other maintained he could not possibly do so.

Why something that sounded so easy to do was not so easy in point of fact needs a little more detailed explanation.

Joykali Devi, widow of the late Madhavchandra Tarkavachaspati, was heiress to this temple of Radhanath Jiu. The Professor had never been able for a single day to prove to his wife the title of Tarkavachaspati which had been bestowed on him by the *tol*. Some pundits averred, however, that the title was justified, inasmuch as *tarka* and *vakya* had all fallen to his wife's share and as *pati* he had enjoyed the full benefit of both. As a matter of fact, however, Joykali did not talk much, but often with a word or two, or even without saying a single word, she could stem the strongest torrent of talk.

Joykali was a tall, well-built, sharp-nosed, keenly intelligent woman. During her husband's lifetime,

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their religiously-endowed property had been brought to the verge of destruction. As a widow she had cleared up everything, collected all arrears of rent, had the boundaries settled and reclaimed areas long dispossessed. Nobody could cheat her out of a single cowrie that was hers by right. As there was a large amount of masculinity in the mental composition of this woman, she had no real companions. Women were afraid of her. She could not tolerate backbiting or small talk or whimpering. Men also feared her, because she could put to shame the bottomless abyss of laziness exhibited by the upper class of the village society, dawdling in the temple courtyard, by a kind of silent, fierce, scornful glance that could pierce even through the thick hide of their stolidity and reach their hearts.

This elderly widow had an extraordinary capacity for feeling strong contempt and expressing that contempt strongly. With a word or even without a word, by expression and gesture she could shrivel up a person whom she considered guilty of an offence.

Her tireless hand was to be seen on all ceremonial occasions in all the weal and woes of the village. Everywhere she secured an honoured place for herself without any effort and with the utmost ease. Whenever she was present, neither she herself nor anyone else there had the slightest doubt about the highest position being hers.

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She was a most efficient nurse, but the patient feared her like *Yama*, the lord of death. The slightest irregularity in diet or medicine would generate an angry flame which heated the patient more than the temperature due to his own illness.

This tall stern widow was raised like the iron rod of God's justice above the head of the village ; nobody dared either disregard her or love her.

She was connected with the whole village, yet there was none so extremely lonely as she.

Joykali was a childless widow. Two orphan nephews were being brought up in her house. Nobody could say that they were running wild for want of a male guardian or that they were being spoilt by their aunt's blind affection and indulgence. The elder was eighteen years old. Sometimes offers of marriage came for him and he himself was not averse to the bonds of wedlock. But not for a single day did his aunt sympathize with these happy dreams of his. She did not, like other women, imagine that the budding love scenes of the adolescent newly-married were something too sweet and enjoyable for words. On the other hand, she considered as extremely derogatory the possibility that her nephew should marry and settle down idly at home like other gentlefolk, and daily grow fat, pampered by his wife. "Let Pulin begin to earn something first," she would say severely, "then he can think of bringing a wife

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home". The neighbours' hearts were likely to break on hearing these harsh remarks of *pishima*.

2

The *Thakur-bari* was the object of Joykali's most devoted care. Not the slightest negligence was permissible in the feeding, clothing, bathing and sleeping of the deity. The two officiating priests were much more afraid of this one woman than they were of the *Thakur* himself. There was a time when the deity had not received his full share. Because the worshipping priest had another worshipful idol installed in his secret temple whose name was Nistarini ; so the offerings of milk, ghee, curd and flour used to be divided between heaven and hell. But now under Joykali's supervision, the whole sixteen-anna of offerings was being enjoyed by the *Thakur*, and the false gods had to seek their means of livelihood elsewhere.

Through the widow's care the temple yard was kept scrupulously clean, there was not a single blade of grass to be seen anywhere. The honey-suckle creeper climbed up a trellis on one side ; as soon as its dry leaves fell to the ground, Joykali picked them up and threw them outside. The widow could not bear the slightest flaw in the neatness, cleanliness and holiness of the *Thakur-bari*. Formerly boys of the neighbourhood used to come and take shelter in the corner of this yard during

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their games of hide-and-seek ; and kids sometimes came and nibbled at the bark of the creeper. But now there was no such opportunity. Boys were not allowed into the courtyard except on feast-days, and a blow of the stick was all the hungry kids received when they were turned away from the door, bleating aloud for their goat-mammas.

Even the nearest relative was not admitted into the courtyard if he happened to be of heterodox habits. A brother-in-law of Joykali's, who was partial to fowl's flesh cooked by heathens, had come on a visit to his relatives in the village and was about to enter the temple courtyard, when Joykali protested promptly and vehemently, thus almost causing a rupture with her own sister. The widow was so extraordinarily and needlessly punctilious about this temple that to outsiders it appeared more or less like insanity.

Everywhere else Joykali was hard and haughty and held aloof ; only within the precincts of this temple she had dedicated herself absolutely to the deity, to whom she was the complete mother, wife and servant-maid ; where he was concerned she was alert, tender, beautiful and meek withal. This stone temple and stone image was the one and only fulfilment of her fundamental womanly nature. They were her husband, her son, her whole world.

From the above readers will understand how infinite was the courage of the boy who had vowed to secure honeysuckle blossoms from the court-

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yard of the temple. He was Nolin, Joykali's youngest nephew. He knew his aunt thoroughly well, yet his dauntless nature had not submitted to her discipline. Wherever there was danger he felt drawn towards it, and wherever there was discipline his restless mind yearned to disobey it. Tradition has it that as a child his aunt's nature was exactly similar.

Joykali was then absorbed in telling her beads in the verandah, whilst gazing upon the deity with an expression of mingled motherly love and devotion.

The boy came up silently from behind and stood beneath the honeysuckle creeper. He saw that the blossoms of the lower branches had all been gathered for the puja. So he climbed up the trellis very slowly and carefully. No sooner had he stretched out his body and arm in order to pluck one or two blossoming buds he could see growing on the topmost branches than the worn-out structure collapsed and gave way under the strain, bringing down the clinging creeper and the boy together to the ground.

Joykali quickly rushed to the scene and saw her nephew's performance. She caught hold of his arm and forcibly pulled him up from the ground. He was hurt badly enough, but that could not be called punishment, because it was the reaction of unconscious matter. So Joykali's conscious punishment began to fall heavily and repeatedly on the

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bruised body of the prostrate boy. The lad bore it all in silence, without shedding a single tear. Then his aunt dragged him into the room and locked him in. His afternoon meal for the day was stopped.

On hearing that his food was forbidden, the maidservant Mokshada pleaded for his forgiveness with sorrowful voice and tearful eyes. But Joykali's heart would not melt. There was no member of the household so bold as to supply food to the hungry boy in secret without the mistress's knowledge. After having sent for a man to mend the trellis-work, Joykali came and sat again in the verandah, rosary in hand. A short while afterwards Mokshada timidly came up to her and said: "Grannie, little uncle is crying with hunger. May I bring him some milk?"

Joykali uttered a short "No" with unrelenting face. Mokshada went away.

From the room nearby the piteous weeping of Nolin became gradually transformed into angry growling till at last after a long time his tired sobs sounded fitfully in his prayerful aunt's ears.

When Nolin's moaning voice had become almost inaudible from fatigue, the frightened cry of another creature began to sound somewhere near at hand, and the shouting of running men at a distance all together combined to raise a hue and cry in the road in front of the temple.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps was heard in the

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courtyard. Turning round, Joykali saw the fallen creeper stirring.

"Nolin!" she cried out angrily.

Nobody replied. She surmised that Nolin had somehow contrived to run away from jail and come to pester her again. Upon this the widow pressed her lips together in a grim determined fashion and descended into the courtyard. Near the arbour she again cried "Nolin!" There was no reply. Raising the branches she discovered that a most unclean pig had taken refuge amongst the leaves in terror of its life.

The trellised arbour that was the abridged symbol of Brindaban amidst these brick walls, the scent of whose blooming clusters recalled the sweet breath of the milkmaids and evoked the beautiful dreamland of the happy hours of dalliance spent by the banks of the Kalindi river—that sacred Eden whose care was dearer than life to the widow became suddenly polluted by this disgusting affair.

The officiating priest rushed up, stick in hand, to drive it away. But Joykali came forward at once to prevent him, and quickly shut the temple-door from inside.

Soon afterwards a drunken lot of *doms* came up to the door of the temple and began to clamour for their sacrificial animal to be given up. Standing behind the closed temple-door, Joykali said: "Get out, you fellows, go back and don't defile my temple".

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The band of *doms* went back. They could hardly believe that Joykali Thakurani would give asylum to an unclean animal in her temple of Radhanath Jiu, though they had almost seen as much with their own eyes.

The supreme Lord of all creatures in the universe was highly pleased at this trivial incident, though the petty lord of the small village, known as Society, was mightily perturbed.

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APURBA HAD GOT HIS B.A. DEGREE and was coming back home to his village. The river, which flowed past it, was a small one. It became dried up during the hot weather, but now in the July monsoon the heavy rains had swollen its current and it was full to the brim.

The boat, which carried Apurba, reached the *ghat* whence the roof of his home could be seen through the dense foliage of the trees. Nobody knew that he was coming and therefore there was no one to receive him at the landing. The boatman offered to carry his bag, but Apurba picked it up himself, and took a leap from the boat. The bank was slippery, and he fell flat upon the muddy stair, bag and all.

As he did so, peal after peal of very sweet laughter rose in the sky, and startled the birds in the neighbouring trees. Apurba got up and tried to regain his composure as best as he could. When he sought for the source of his discomfiture, he found, sitting upon a heap of bricks lately unloaded from some cargo boat, a girl shaking her sides with laughter. Apurba recognized her as Mrinmayi, the daughter of their neighbour. This family had built their former house some distance away, but the river shifted its course cutting away into the

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land ; and they had been obliged to change their quarter and settle down in the village only about two years ago.

Mrinmayi was the talk of all the village. The men called her 'madcap', but the village matrons were in a state of perpetual anxiety because of her untractable wildness. All her games were with the boys of the place, and she had the utmost contempt for the girls of her own age. The favourite child of her father, she had got into these unmanageable ways. Her mother would often complain to her friends of her husband's spoiling the child. But, because she was well aware that the father would be cut to the quick if he saw his daughter in tears, the mother had not the heart to punish the girl herself.

Mrinmayi's face was more like that of a boy than a girl. Her short crop of curly hair reached down to her shoulders, and her big dark eyes showed no sign of fear or shyness. When the boat, carrying the absentee landlord of the village, was moored at the landing stage, she did not share the feeling of awe which possessed the neighbourhood, but shook her curly mane and took up a naked child in her arms and was the first to come and take her observation of the habits of this strange creature.

Apurba had come in touch with this girl on former occasions, and he had got into the habit of thinking about her from time to time during his

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leisure, and even while at work. Naturally, therefore, this laughter, with which she greeted his arrival, did not please him, in spite of its musical quality. He gave up his bag to the boatman and almost ran away towards his house. The whole setting of things was romantic—the river bank, the shade of the trees, the morning sunshine with birds' songs, and his youth of twenty years. The brick heaps hardly fitted in with the picture, but the girl who sat on the top of them made up for all deficiencies.

2

The widowed mother was beside herself with joy when her son returned unexpectedly. She at once sent her men to all parts of the village to search for milk and curds and fish. There was quite a stir among the neighbours. After the mid-day meal, the mother ventured to suggest to Apurba that he should turn his thoughts towards marriage. Apurba was prepared for this attack, as it had been tried before, and he had then put it off on the plea of examinations. But now that he had got his degree, he could have no such excuse to delay the inevitable. So he told his mother that if a suitable bride could be discovered he could then make up his mind.

The mother said that the discovery had been already made, and therefore there was no further

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excuse for deliberation. But Apurba was of opinion that deliberation was necessary, and insisted on seeing the girl before consenting to marry her. The mother agreed to this, though the request seemed superfluous.

The next day Apurba went out on his marriage expedition. The intended bride lived in a house which was not far from their own. Apurba took special care about his dress before starting. He put on his new silk suit, and a fashionable turban much affected by the Calcutta people. He did not forget to display his patent leather shoes and silk umbrella. His reception was loudly cordial in the house of his would-be father-in-law. The little victim—the intended bride—was scrubbed and painted, be-ribboned and bejewelled, and brought before Apurba. She sat in a corner of the room, veiled up to her chin, with her head nearly touching her knees, and her middle-aged maidservant at her back to encourage her when in trouble. Her young brother sat near closely observing Apurba,—his turban, his watch-chain, his newly budding moustache.

Apurba solemnly asked the girl: "What text-books are you reading in your school?"

No answer came from this bundle of bashfulness wrapped in coloured silk. After repeated questionings and secret pushings in the back by the maidservant, she rapidly gave the names of all her lesson-books in one breath.

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Just at this moment the sound of scampering feet was heard outside, and Mrinmayi burst into the room very much out of breath. She did not give the least heed to Apurba, but at once caught hold of the hand of Rakhal, the young brother, and tried to drag him outside. But Rakhal was intently engaged in cultivating his faculty of observation and refused to stir. The maidservant tried to scold Mrinmayi, keeping the pitch of her voice within the proper limits of decorum. Apurba retained his composure and sat still and sullen, fondling the watch-chain with his fingers.

When Mrinmayi failed in her attempt to make Rakhal move, she gave the boy a sounding smack on the shoulder, then she pulled up the veil from the face of the intended bride, and rushed out of the room like a miniature tornado. The maidservant growled and grumbled and Rakhal began to laugh immoderately at the sudden unveiling of his sister. He evidently did not take ill the blow he had received, because they had with each other a running account of such amenities. There was once a time when Mrinmayi had her hair long enough to reach her waist, and it was Rakhal who had ploughed his scissors through it one day, till the girl in disgust had snatched them from the boy's hand and completed the destruction herself, leaving a mass of curls lying upon the dust like a bunch of black grapes.

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After this cataclysm, the business of the examination came to a sudden stop. The girl-bride rose from her seat and changed from a circle of misery into a straight line, and then disappeared into the inner apartment. Apurba got up, still stroking his moustache, only to discover that his patent leather shoes had vanished. A great search was made for them, but they were nowhere to be found. There was nothing else to do but to borrow from the head of the house a pair of old slippers, which were sadly out of keeping with the rest of his attire.

When Apurba reached the lane by the side of the village pool, the same peal of laughter rang through the sky which he had heard the day before; and while he stood shamefaced and irresolute, looking about him, the culprit came out of her ambushade and flung the patent leather shoes before him and tried to escape. Apurba rushed after her quickly and made her captive, holding her by the wrist. Mrinmayi writhed and wriggled, but could not set herself free. A sunbeam fell upon her mischievous face through a gap in the branches overhead, and Apurba gazed intently into her eyes, like a traveller peering through the limpid water of a rushing stream at the glistening pebbles below. He seemed to hesitate to complete his adventure, and slowly relaxed his hold and let his captive escape. If Apurba had boxed Mrinmayi's ears in anger, that would have seemed more natural to the girl than this silent incompleteness of punishment.

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3

It is difficult to understand why a young man of culture and learning like Apurba should be so anxious to reveal his worth to this slip of a village girl. What harm would there be, if, in her pitiful ignorance, she should ignore him and choose that foolish poor Rakhal as her companion? Why should he struggle to prove to her that he wrote a monthly article in the journal *Visvadip*, and that a manuscript book of no mean size was waiting for publication in the bottom of his trunk, along with his scent bottles, tinted notepaper, harmonium lessons, etc.

In the evening Apurba's mother asked him: "Have you approved of your bride?"

Apurba said with a slight hesitation: "Yes, I like one of the girls."

"One of the girls!" she asked, "why, what do you mean?"

After a great deal of beating about the bush she found out that her son had selected Mrinmayi for his bride. When she grasped this fact she greatly lost her respect for the B.A. degree. Then followed a long struggle between them. At last the mother persuaded herself that Mrinmayi was not wholly impervious to improvement. She began to suspect also that the girl's face had a charm of its own, but the next moment the cropped head of hair came to her mind and gave her a feeling of disgust. Recog-

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nizing, however, that hair is more amenable to reason than human nature, she felt consoled, and the betrothal was made.

Mrinmayi's father got the news. He was a clerk in an office at a small distant river station of a steamship company. He was engaged all day in selling tickets and loading and unloading cargo, living in a small hut with a corrugated iron roof. His eyes overflowed with tears when he got the letter telling him what had happened. How much was pleasure and how much was pain would be difficult to analyse.

Ishan applied to the head office in Calcutta for leave of absence. The reason of the betrothal seemed insufficient to the English manager of the company and the application was rejected. Ishan then asked for a postponement of the marriage till the autumn holidays ; but he was told by the mother of the bridegroom that the most auspicious day for the marriage that year fell in the last week of the current month. So Ishan went on selling tickets and loading and unloading cargo with a heavy heart,—his petitions rejected from both sides. After this, Mrinmayi's mother and all the matrons of the village began to admonish the girl about the future household duties. She was warned that love of play, quickness of movement, loudness of laughter, companionship of boys and disregard of good manners in eating would not be tolerated in her husband's house. They were completely successful

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in proving the terrible cramped constraint of married life. Mrinmayi took the proposal of her marriage as a sentence of life-imprisonment, with hanging at the end of it. Like an unmanageable little pony, she took the bit between her teeth and said, "I'm not going to be married."

4

But she had to marry after all. And then began her lesson. The whole universe shrank for her within the walls of her mother-in-law's household. The latter began at once her reformation duties. She hardened her face and said:

"My child, you are not a baby. The vulgar loudness of your behaviour won't suit our family."

The moral which Mrinmayi learnt from these words was that she must find some more suitable place for herself, and she became invisible that very afternoon. They went on vainly searching for her till her friend Rakhal played the traitor, and revealed her hiding place in a deserted, broken down wooden chariot once used for taking out the image of the god for an airing. After this, the atmosphere of her mother-in-law's home became intolerably hot. Rain came down at night.

Apurba, coming close to Mrinmayi in his bed, whispered to her: "Mrinmayi, don't you love me?" Mrinmayi broke out: "No, I shall never love you!"

"But what harm have I done you?" said Apurba.

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"Why did you marry me?" was the reply. To give a satisfactory explanation to this question was difficult, but Apurba said to himself: 'I must win, in the end, this rebellious heart.'

On the next day, the mother-in-law observed some signs of petulance in Mrinmayi and shut her up in a room. When Mrinmayi could find no way to get out, she tore the bed sheet to rags with her teeth in vain anger, and flinging herself on the floor burst out weeping and calling in agony: "Father, father!"

Just then somebody came and sat by her. He tried to arrange her dishevelled hair as she turned from side to side, but Mrinmayi angrily shook her head and pushed his hand away. Apurba (for it was he) bent his face to her ear and whispered:

"I have secretly opened the gate ; let us run away by the back door."

Mrinmayi again violently shook her head and said: "No."

Apurba tried to raise her face gently by the chin saying: "Do look who is there." Rakhal had come and was standing foolishly by the door looking at Mrinmayi. But the girl pushed away Apurba's hand without raising her face.

He said: "Rakhal has come to play with you. Won't you come?"

She said: "No!" Rakhal was greatly relieved to be allowed to run away from this scene.

Apurba sat still and silent. Mrinmayi wept and

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wept, till she was so tired that she fell asleep ; then Apurba went out silently and shut the door.

The next day Mrinmayi received a letter from her father, in which he expressed his regret for not being able to be present at the marriage of his darling daughter. He ended with his blessings. The girl went to her mother-in-law and said: "I must go to my father."

A scolding began at once: "Your father! what a thing to ask. Your father has no decent house for himself—how can you go to him?"

Mrinmayi came back to her room in despair and cried to herself, "Father, take me away from this place! I have nobody here to love me. I shall die if I am left here."

In the depth of the night, when her husband fell asleep, she quietly opened the door and went out of the house. It was cloudy, yet the moonlight was strong enough to show her the path. But Mrinmayi had no idea which was the way to reach her father. She had a belief that the road, which the post runners took, led to all the addresses of all the men in the world.

So she went that way, and was quite tired out with walking when the night was nearly ended.

The early birds doubtfully twittered their greetings to the morning, when Mrinmayi came to the end of the road at the river bank where there was a big bazaar. Just then she heard the clatter of the iron ring of the mail runner. She rushed to

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him and in her eager, tired voice cried: "I want to go to my father at Kushiganj. Do take me with you."

The postman told her hurriedly that he did not know where Kushiganj was and the next moment wakened up the boatman of the mail boat and sailed away. He had no time either to pity or to question.

By the time Mrinmayi had descended the landing stairs and called a boat, the street and the river-bank were fully awake. Before the boatman could answer, some one from a boat near at hand called out:

"Hallo, Mrinu! How on earth could you get here?"

The girl replied in all eagerness: "Banamali, I must go to my father at Kushiganj. Please take me in your boat!"

This boatman belonged to her own village and knew all about the wild untameable girl. He said to her: "You want to go to your father? That's good. I'll take you."

Mrinmayi got into the boat. The clouds thickened and the rain came down in showers. The river, swollen by the monsoon, rocked the boat, and Mrinmayi fell asleep. When she woke up, she found herself in her own bed in her mother-in-law's house.

The maidservant began scolding her the moment she saw her awake. The mother-in-law came next. As she entered, Mrinmayi opened her eyes wide

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and silently looked in her face. But when the mother-in-law made a reference to the ill-breeding of Mrinmayi's family, the girl rushed out of her room and entered the next and shut the door from the inside.

Apurba came to his mother and said: "Mother, I don't see any harm in sending Mrinmayi for just a few days to her father's house."

The mother's reply was to scold Apurba in unmeasured terms for selecting this one girl from all the suitable brides who might have been had for the mere asking.

5

In the middle of the night, Apurba awakened Mrinmayi and said: "Mrinmayi, are you ready to go to your father?" She clutched his hand and said: "Yes." Apurba whispered:

"Then come. Let us run away from this place. I have got a boat ready at the landing. Come."

Mrinmayi cast a grateful glance at her husband's face, and got up and dressed, and was ready to go. Apurba left a letter for his mother, and then both of them left the house together hand in hand.

This was the first time that Mrinmayi had put her hand into her husband's with a spontaneous feeling of dependence. They went on their journey along the lonely village road through the depth of the night.

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When they reached the landing stage, they got into a boat, and in spite of the turbulent joy which she felt Mrinmayi fell asleep. The next day,—what emancipation, what unspeakable bliss it was! They passed by all the different villages, markets, cultivated fields, and groups of boats at anchor near some *ghat*. Mrinmayi began to ply her husband with questions about every little trifle: where were those boats coming from, what were their cargoes, what was the name of that village?—questions whose answers were not in the text-books which Apurba studied in his college. His friends might be concerned to hear that Apurba's answers did not always tally with the truth. He would not hesitate for a moment to describe bags of sesame as linseed, and the village of Pauchbere as Rainagar, or to point out the district magistrate's court as the landlord's office. Whatever answer she got, Mrinmayi was fully satisfied, never doubting its accuracy.

The next day the boat reached Kushiganj. Ishan, seated on his office stool, in his hut dimly lighted with a square oil-lantern, was deep in his accounts before his small desk, his big ledger open before him, when this young pair entered the room. Mrinmayi at once called out:

“Father!”

Such a word, uttered in so sweet a voice, had never sounded before in that corrugated iron room. Ishan could hardly restrain his tears and sat dumb for a moment, vainly seeking for some greeting.

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He was in great confusion how fitly to receive the young married couple in his office, crowded with bales of jute and piled up ledgers, which had also to serve him for a bedroom. And then about the meals—the poor man had to cook for himself his own simple dinner, but how could he offer that to his guests? Mrinmayi said, “Father, let us cook the food ourselves.”

And Apurba joined in this proposal with great zest. In this room, with all its lack of space for man and food, their joy welled up in full abundance, like the jet of water thrown up all the higher because the opening of the fountain is narrow.

Three days were passed in this manner. Steamers came to stop at the landing stage all day long with their noisy crowd of men. At last, in the evening, the river-bank would become deserted and then—what freedom! And the cooking preparations in which the art of cookery was not carried to its perfection,—what fun it was! And the jokes and mock quarrels about the mock deficiencies in Mrinmayi's domestic skill,—what absurd carryings on! But it had to come to an end at last. Apurba did not dare to prolong his French leave, and Ishan also thought it was wise for them to return.

When the culprits reached home, the mother remained sulkily silent. She never even blamed them for what they had done so as to give them an opportunity to explain their conduct. This sullen silence became at last intolerable, and Apurba

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expressed his intention of going back to college in order to study Law. The mother, affecting indifference, said to him: "What about your wife?"

Apurba answered: "Let her remain here."

"Oh, no, no!" cried the mother, "you should take her with you."

Apurba said in a voice of annoyance:

"Very well."

The preparation went on for their departure to the town, and on the night before leaving Apurba, coming to his bed, found Mrinmayi in tears. This hurt him greatly and he cried:

"Mrinmayi, don't you want to come to Calcutta with me?"

The girl replied: "No!"

Apurba's next question was, "Don't you love me?" But the question remained unanswered. There are times when answers to such questions are absolutely simple, but at other times they become too complex for a young girl to answer.

Apurba asked: "Do you feel unwilling to leave Rakhal behind?"

Mrinmayi instantly answered: "Yes". For a moment this young man, who was proud of his B.A. degree, felt a needle prick of jealousy deep down in his heart, and said:

"I shan't be able to come back home for a long time." Mrinmayi had nothing to say. "It may be two years or more," he added. Mrinmayi told him with coolness, "You had better bring

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back with you, for Rakhal, a Rogers knife with three blades."

Apurba sat up and asked:

"Then you mean to stay on here?"

Mrinmayi said:

"Yes, I shall go to my own mother."

Apurba breathed a deep sigh and said:

"Very well: I shall not come home, until you write me a letter asking me to come to you. Are you very, very glad?"

Mrinmayi thought this question needed no answer, and fell asleep. Apurba got no sleep that night.

When it was nearly dawn, Apurba awakened Mrinmayi and said:

"Mrinu, it is time to go. Let me take you to your mother's house."

When his wife got up from her bed, Apurba held her by both hands and said:

"I have a prayer to make to you. I have helped you several times and I want to claim my reward."

Mrinmayi was surprised and said:

"What?"

Apurba answered:

"Mrinu, give me a kiss out of pure love."

When the girl heard this absurd request and saw Apurba's solemn face, she burst out laughing. When it was over, she held her face for a kiss, but broke out laughing again. After a few more

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attempts, she gave it up. Apurba pulled her ear gently as a mild punishment.

7

When Mrinmayi came to her mother's house, she was surprised to find that it was not as pleasant to her as before. Time seemed to hang heavily on her hands, and she wondered in her mind what was lacking in the familiar home surroundings. Suddenly it seemed to her that the whole house and village were deserted and she longed to go to Calcutta. She did not know that even on that last night the earlier portion of her life, to which she clung, had changed its aspect before she knew it. Now she could easily shake off her past associations as the tree sheds its dead leaves. She did not understand that her destiny had struck the blow and severed her youth from her childhood, with its magic blade, in such a subtle manner that they kept together even after the stroke; but directly she moved, one half of her life fell from the other and Mrinmayi looked at it in wonder. The young girl, who used to occupy the old bedroom in this house, no longer existed; all her memory hovered round another bed in another bedroom.

Mrinmayi refused to go out of doors any longer, and her laughter had a strangely different ring. Rakhal became slightly afraid of her. He gave up all thought of playing with her.

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One day, Mrinmayi came to her mother and asked her:

"Mother, please take me to my mother-in-law's house."

After this, one morning the mother-in-law was surprised to see Mrinmayi come and touch the ground with her forehead before her feet. She got up at once and took her in her arms. Their union was complete in a moment, and the cloud of misunderstanding was swept away leaving the atmosphere glistening with the radiance of tears.

When Mrinmayi's body and mind became filled with womanhood, deep and tender it gave her an aching pain. Her eyes became sad, like the shadow of rain upon some lake, and she put these questions to her husband in her own mind—"Why did you not have the patience to understand me, when I was late in understanding you? Why did you put up with my disobedience, when I refused to follow you to Calcutta?"

Suddenly she came to fathom the look in Apurba's eyes when, on that morning, he had caught hold of her hand by the village pool and then slowly released her. She remembered, too, the futile flights of that kiss, which had never reached its goal, and was now like a thirsty bird haunting that past opportunity. She recollected how Apurba had said to her that he would never come back until he had received from her a message asking him to do so; and she sat down

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at once to write a letter. The gilt-edged notepaper which Apurba had given her was brought out of its box, and with great care she began to write in a big hand, smudging her fingers with ink. With her first word she plunged into the subject without addressing him:

*Why don't you write to me? How are you?
And please come home.*

She could think of no other words to say. But though the important message had been given, yet unfortunately the unimportant words occupy the greatest space in human communication. She racked her brains to add a few more words to what she had written, and then wrote:

This time don't forget to write me letters and write how you are, and come back home, and mother is quite well. Our black cow had a calf last night—

Here she came to the end of her resources. She put her letter into the envelope and poured out all her love as she wrote the name: Srijukta Babu Apurbakrishna Roy. She did not know that anything more was needed by way of an address, so the letter did not reach its goal, and the postal authorities were not to blame for it.

It was vacation time. Yet Apurba never came home. The mother thought that he was nourishing anger against her. Mrinmayi was certain that her letter was not well enough written to satisfy

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him. At last the mother said to her daughter-in-law, "Apurba has been absent for so long that I am thinking of going to Calcutta to see him. Would you like to come with me?"

Mrinmayi gave a violent nod of assent. Then she ran to her room and shut herself in. She fell upon her bed, clutched the pillow to her breast, and gave vent to her feelings by laughing and excited movements. When this fit was over, she became grave and sad and sat up on the bed and wept in silence.

Without telling Apurba, these two repentant women went to Calcutta to ask for Apurba's forgiveness. The mother had a son-in-law in Calcutta, and so she put up at his house. That very same evening, Apurba broke his promise and began to write a letter to Mrinmayi. But he found no terms of endearment fit to express his love, and felt disgusted with his mother tongue for its poverty. But when he got a letter from his brother-in-law, informing him of the arrival of his mother and inviting him to dinner, he hastened to his sister's house without delay.

The first question he asked his mother, when he met her, was: "Mother, is everybody at home quite well?"

The mother answered: "Yes, I have come here to take you back home."

Apurba said that he thought it was not necessary on her part to have taken all this trouble for such

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a purpose, and he had his examination before him, etc., etc.

At dinner his sister asked him why he had not brought his wife with him when he returned to Calcutta this time. Apurba began to say very solemnly that he had his law examination to think of, etc., etc.

The brother-in-law cut in smiling:

"All this is a mere excuse; the real reason is that he is afraid of us."

His sister replied: "You are indeed a terrifying person! The poor child may well get a shock when she sees you."

Thus the laughter and jokes became plentiful, but Apurba remained silent. He was accusing his mother in his mind for not having had the consideration to bring Mrinmayi with her. Then he thought that possibly his mother had tried, but failed, owing to Mrinmayi's unwillingness, and he felt afraid even to question his mother about it; the whole scheme of things seemed to him full of incorrigible blunders.

When the dinner was over, it came on to rain and his sister said, "*Dada*, you sleep here."

But Apurba replied, "No, I must go home. I have work to do."

The brother-in-law said, "How absurd! You have no one at home to call you to account for your absence, and you needn't be anxious."

Then his sister told him that he was looking

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very tired, and it was better for him to leave the company and go to bed. Apurba went to his bedroom and found it in darkness. His sister asked him if he wanted a light, but he said that he preferred the dark. When his sister had left, he groped his way to the bedstead and prepared to get into bed.

All of a sudden a tender pair of arms, with a jingle of bracelets, were flung round his neck, and two lips soft as flower petals almost smothered him with kisses wet with tears.

At first it startled Apurba greatly, but then he came to know that those kisses, which had been obstructed once by laughter, had now found their completion in tears.

THE STOLEN TREASURE

IN THE EPIC AGES a man had to win his wife by his valour ; only the brave then deserved the fair. I won my wife by a cowardly trick, though she came to know of it long afterwards. One thing, however, I may claim to have done : I have tried to deserve my wife after our marriage, to pay day after day the price of what I had gained by fraud.

Most men forget that conjugal rights have to be established anew every day. They just clear their goods from the Custom-house with the permit granted them by society, and seem to give no more thought to the matter afterwards. It is as if they had been given the authority of the police who derive it from the uniform they wear. Divest them of their uniforms and they become at once the most abject of men.

Marriage is like a musical drama that takes a life-time to perform. Its song has a single burden, but a thousand daily improvisations. It is Sunetra who has made me realize this so clearly. Her love seems inexhaustible in its riches and its splendour. You seem to hear at its portals the *sanai* piping out wedding-music in the strains of *sahana* through the livelong day. I return from office one day to find ready for me a glass of iced *sherbet* made of *Phalsa* berries ; its very colour is a joy to see.

THE STOLEN TREASURE

By its side on a small silver plate is a garland of jasmines ; its scent welcoming me as I enter the room. Another day I find a cup full of the milk and pith of the palm stone, frozen in an ice-cream freezer, and on a plate beside it a single sun-flower. All this does not sound anything very special ; but it makes one realize that Sunetra feels my existence and thinks of me afresh every day. To feel the familiar as ever now is a gift of the artist ; the average person can only see and do as custom dictates. Sunetra has love's genius for inventing ever-new ways of serving her beloved.

Our daughter Aruna is now seventeen, exactly Sunetra's age when I married her. Sunetra is thirty-eight, but she takes good care of her looks and her dress, regarding this attention as a daily ritual to be practised before offering herself to her beloved.

Sunetra loves white Santipur *saris* with black borders. She has put up without protest with the censure of the propagandists of *khaddar*, but she has never accepted *khaddar*. She says, "What I love is the country weaver's loom and his skilled hand. He is an artist who chooses his own yarn as I choose the finished cloth". The fact is Sunetra knows that a light white *sari* suggests different colours at different times ; and she gives one the impression of variety without ever seeming to have specially decked herself. She knows my subconscious mind's horizon is lighted up to see

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her so prettily dressed ; I am pleased without knowing why.

In each one of us there is a being to whose infinite mystery love alone has the golden key ; it scorns the spurious coin of pride. For twenty-one years now Sunetra has made me this supreme offering of love with all her heart and soul. In the vermillion spot on her fair forehead she has written every day the message of an endless wonder. I am the centre of her universe, and to be that I have had to do nothing but be like any other man in the world. Love discovers the extraordinary in the ordinary. The scriptures say, "Know thyself". I know myself in my joy that another has known my true self in love.

2

My father was one of the directors of a well-known bank. I joined its management. I was not allowed by any means to be what is called a sleeping partner, I was bridled and harnessed tightly to my office work for which I was suited neither in mind nor in body. I had wanted to be an inspector in the Forest Department so that I could run about in the open air and indulge my taste for hunting. But my father thought only of position and dignity and pointed out that the bank job which I had been offered was one that rarely came a Bengali's way. So I had to give in.

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Besides, a man's position is a thing valuable in the eyes of women. Sunetra's sister's husband is a professor in the Imperial Service, which gives his womenfolk the right to hold their heads high. If I had been a forest inspector going about in a *sola* hat and covering the floor of my rooms with tiger and bear skins, it might have kept my weight down, but at the same time it would have kept down my pride of position when compared to that of my well-placed neighbours. Who knows, this might have hurt the self-esteem of the women of my household!

But the pressure of my desk-bound immobility soon began to dull the edge of my youth. Any other man would have been calmly indifferent to the change, not regarding the extension of his waist-line as a disaster. But I could not take it so calmly. I know Sunetra had been drawn to me not only by my qualities but also by my handsome figure. This bridal-wreath made by the Creator himself was surely as indispensable to-day as when I had first welcomed her with it. Sunetra is still surprisingly young, while my youth is fast ebbing away leaving only a swelling bank balance.

What we were like when we first met I can realize vividly today when I look at my daughter and her friend Sailen. I see the dawn of their youth tinged with the same warm colours that had once touched our young lives with a glow as of the morning sun. When I see Sailen I see my

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youth again in every line of his body, and I see in him, too, the same swift energy and abundant high spirits, and at times the same anxiety and sudden waning of enthusiasm when some hope is cheated of its fulfilment. The path I once trod is before him now ; and he tries to win his way into Sunetra's affections, though he does not take much notice of me. On the other hand, Aruna knows that her father understands her trouble ; on some days she comes and sits at my feet on a cane stool without speaking a word, and with the tenderness of unshed tears in her eyes. She knows her mother can be cruel but I cannot.

It is not that her mother does not understand what is troubling Aruna ; but she believes it is only the morning rumble of the clouds that would pass with the day. I disagree with her there. You can kill a keen appetite by refusing to satisfy it, and the heart once thwarted will have lost its relish for young love by the time the tables are laid a second time. The morning tune falls flat on the ear at midday. The guardians say, "Let the age of discretion come and then . . ." etc. But alas, the age of discretion is on the reverse side of the age of love.

A few days back the month of Bhadra had ushered in the full monsoon rains. Under the heavy showers Calcutta's houses of wood and brick looked almost soft, and the town's harsh noises sounded like voices choked with tears. Her mother

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thought Aruna was in my library preparing for her examination ; but when I went there for a book, I saw her sitting before an open window in the evening gloom. She had not done her hair yet, and the rain beat in on her unbraided tresses with each gust of the east wind.

Without saying anything to Sunetra I immediately wrote a note to Sailen inviting him to tea with us, and sent my car for him. When he came, it was not difficult to see that Sunetra was not pleased at his unexpected arrival.

"I have sent for you because I can't, with my poor knowledge of mathematics, get to the bottom of modern physics. I want to understand the quantum theory, but I find my unaided knowledge too old and infirm for my purpose", I said to Sailen by way of explanation.

It goes without saying that my study of modern physics did not proceed very far. It is my belief that Aruna saw through my little game and congratulated herself on the possession of such an ideal father. We had just started on the quantum theory when the telephone bell rang. I jumped up saying, "I'm afraid it's some urgent business. Do one thing, you two go on playing table-tennis till I can snatch myself back again."

I took up the receiver. "Hullo," I heard a voice asking, "is that 12 . . ?" "No", I replied, "this is 70 . . ."

I put down the receiver and the next moment

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went down to my room below and, taking up an old newspaper, tried to read it. When it grew dark I switched on the light.

Sunetra came in, her face very serious. I smiled and said, "If a meteorologist had seen you now he would have put up a storm signal."

She made no response to my witticism. "Why do you give Sailen such indulgence time and again?" she asked.

"He has within himself the person who indulges him", I replied.

"If we could stop them meeting for some time, this childishness would pass."

"But why should we butcher their childishness? The days will pass, they'll grow older and never again get back such childishness."

"You don't believe in the stars. I do. They can never suit each other."

"One does not see how or when stars come together, but it's quite easy to see that they have come together in their hearts."

"You can never understand me. Our true mates are fixed for us the moment we are born. If we are deluded by infatuation into accepting any others we become unconsciously guilty of unfaithfulness. Sorrows and danger follow as punishments."

"But how are we to find our true mates?" I asked.

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"They have letters of introduction signed by the stars themselves," she replied.

3

The truth could no longer be hidden.

My father-in-law, Ajit Kumar Bhattacharyya, was born in a family with a long tradition of Sanskrit scholarship. His childhood was spent in the atmosphere of the village *tol*. Later he came to Calcutta for university education and took his M.A. in Mathematics. He firmly believed in astrology and was very well-versed in it. His father as a logician of the *Nyaya* school had held that the existence of God could not be proved. My father-in-law too had no faith in the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. All his long-unexercised faith now became centred in the stars ; it developed into a sort of bigotry. It was in this atmosphere that Sunetra grew up, with the stars keeping strict guard over all the four quarters.

I was his favourite pupil, and he used to teach Sunetra too along with me. So we got opportunities to know each other, and a kind of wireless telegraphy communicated to me the fact that my use of the opportunities had not been in vain. My mother-in-law Bibhabati had been brought up in an old-world atmosphere, but she had developed by contact with her husband an open and unprejudiced mind. She differed from her husband in having

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no faith whatsoever in the stars, though she had implicit faith in her tutelary deity. On her husband one day twitting her about it she had said, "You go about timidly saluting the footmen and the guards, but I respect none but the king himself."

"You'll rue it one day, my dear," said her husband. "It doesn't matter if there is a king or not; it's the footmen and the guards who are sure to be there with their sticks and cudgels, as you'll learn to your cost."

"I don't mind if I do," replied the wife, "but I'll never bow my head to those *nagra*-shod louts at the gate."

Sunetra's mother had a great affection for me. I could tell her what was in my mind and seeing my chance one day I said, "Mother, you have no son and I've no mother. Give me your daughter and make me your son. If I have your consent, I'll fall at the professor's feet for his."

"My dear boy," she replied, "we can talk of the professor's consent afterwards. Bring me first your horoscope."

I did so. She said, "No, it's not to be. The professor will never consent, and the girl is her father's pupil."

"What about the girl's mother?" I ventured to ask.

"Don't talk of me," she replied, "I know you, and I know my daughter's mind. I don't need to journey to the stellar regions to know more."

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My mind rebelled against such an unreal obstacle. But how can you fight what is unreal when the blows you aim at it only hit the air?

In the meantime proposals for Sunetra's hand began arriving from many quarters, some among them not unacceptable to the stars and planets. She herself vowed she would never marry, but devote her life to the pursuit of knowledge. Her father did not understand; Sunetra's resolve recalled to his mind the classical example of Bhaskaracharya's daughter Lilavati. The mother understood and wept in secret, and at last one day she gave me a paper and said, "Here is Sunetra's horoscope. Go and have your own modified to tally with this. I can't bear to see her unhappy."

I need hardly say what followed. I rescued Sunetra from the maze of horoscopic figures. Her mother wiped her eyes and said, "It is a good thing that you have done, my son."

That was twenty-one years ago.

4

It was raining without a stop, and the wind was becoming stronger.

"I don't quite like the glare of the light, I think I'll switch it off," I said. And so I did.

The dim light of the street lamp outside filtered through the rain into the room.

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"Do you regard me as your true mate, Suni?" I asked.

"What a question! Have I got to answer that?"

"But what if your stars and planets don't?" I persisted.

"They certainly do. Don't I know?"

"We have been together for so long. Have you never had a doubt?"

"I'll be angry if you ask any more such silly questions."

"Dearest, we've been through much sorrow together. Our first child, our boy, died when eight months old. When I was down with typhoid and half-dead, father died. When I recovered, I found my elder brother had forged father's will and taken all his property. To-day I have to depend entirely on my job for a living. Your mother's affection was my life's pole-star. She was drowned in the Meghna along with your father on their way home for the Puja holidays. I found that the unworldly-minded professor had left a large debt behind. I undertook to pay it off. How am I to know that my evil star has not brought about all these misfortunes? If you had known, you'd never have married me."

Sunetra did not reply, but put her arms round me.

"Haven't we had proof in our life that love is greater than all sorrow and misfortune?" I asked.

"Yes, oh yes!"

"Just think, if the stars decreed that I should die

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before you, wouldn't it still be true that I've made up for that possible loss already in life?"

"Stop, don't say any more."

"Savitri had only a single day together with Satyavan, and yet to her that union was far more real than eternal separation. She did not fear Death's star."

Sunetra was silent. I said, "Your Aruna loves Sailen. That is all we need know ; let everything else remain unknown. What do you say to that, Suni?"

She did not reply.

"When I first loved you, I was thwarted and hindered. I can't bear to see a repetition of my cruel suffering in their young lives at the instance of any star. "I'll never allow any doubt to cross our minds by a comparison of their horoscopes."

A step was heard on the stairs. Sailen was going away. Sunetra quickly got up and reaching the landing said, "What, are you leaving so early, Sailen?"

"It's late, I had no watch on me" he mumbled, somewhat afraid.

"No, it's not at all late," said Sunetra, "you must have dinner with us to-night."

Well, that is what I call indulgence!

That night I told Sunetra all about the alteration in my horoscope.

"I wish you had not told me," she said.

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"Why?"

"I'll live in fear all the time."

"Fear of what? Widowhood?"

She was silent for quite a long time. Then she said, "No, I won't have any fears. If I die before you and have to leave you, it will be a double death for me."

—

GLOSSARY

A feast was given to Brahmins

It is customary among Hindus to offer food to Brahmins on ceremonial occasions in expectation of merit to the feeder in the next life.

Aman rice

Paddy harvested in autumn.

Avatars

Incarnations. According to Hindu belief, when vice becomes rampant in the world, God descends on earth in the garb of a human being for the purpose of cleansing it.

Babu-ji

Babu denotes men of the upper classes. *Ji* is a respectful form of address or reference *e.g.*, Gandhiji, Panditji.

Bahadur

A man who has performed a deed of great valour ; also used, sometimes, in a sarcastic sense.

Begums

Wives of nawabs.

Bibi-Saheb

Mode of addressing a married Muslim woman of the upper classes.

Bit the end of her tongue

A gesture made when any disrespectful, profane or blasphemous word is spoken ; the idea is that it is better to bite off one's tongue than to utter such words.

GLOSSARY

Burn herself with her husband's corpse

It was the custom among women in ancient India, particularly among the Rajput women whose husbands had died in battle, to end their lives in the flames of their husband's funeral pyre. This was a purely voluntary act and naturally required superhuman courage and fortitude. It degenerated later into a compulsory act and even unwilling wives were forced to die in the flames. In the first quarter of the 19th century Raja Rammohun Roy of Bengal, the forerunner of all modern thought in India, who was an uncompromising opponent of idolatry also, led a crusade against this inhuman practice and forced the government of the day to enact a law making this a criminal offence. The practice continued sporadically for some time until, after a few years, it died out completely.

Burra Sahib

European head of a government department or of a business organization.

Car-festival

Known in Bengal as *Rathajatra*, it is celebrated with great pomp at Puri where the Lord Jagannath goes out for his annual visit to his aunt. In Bengal Krishna and Valaram, the Vaishnava gods, and their sister Subhadra, leave their normal abode for a week in the month of *Ashadh* (June-July).

Chaddar

A light piece of cloth, usually white, wrapped round the upper part of the body. Forms, along with the *dhoti*, the main item of dress of a Bengali villager.

Chapkan

A long coat, worn over trousers.

GLOSSARY

Chapprassi

Office orderly or peon.

Cook

Cooks in Hindu households are usually Brahmins (invariably so in Brahmin households) and are on a much higher footing than menial servants.

Cowrie

A kind of small sea-shell. Formerly used in Bengal as the lowest unit of currency.

Curse of a Brahmin

It is popularly believed that a curse, seldom uttered by a pious Brahmin, never fails when it is uttered ; the piousness of the Brahmin and his usual restraint help to make the curse a thing to be feared.

Dada

Elder brother or cousin.

Dandobidhan

Decree of punishment. A Sanskritized word not used in colloquial Bengali.

Dandy-god Kartik

According to Hindu mythology Siva and his wife Parvati had two sons and two daughters. The daughters Lakshmi and Saraswati are the goddesses of wealth and learning respectively. Ganesh, the elder son, is the god of wisdom and Kartik is the general who led the heavenly armies against the demons. He is also described as strikingly handsome and a dandy.

Dasarathi's version

A Bengali version of the Ramayana done by Dasarathi Ray, known as *Dasu Rayer Panchali*.

GLOSSARY

Dharma

Usually translated into English as religion.

Dhoti

Piece of cloth, about four and a half yards long, worn by Indians over the lower part of the body.

Domes

A section of untouchables whose duty is to remove unclaimed dead bodies and the carcasses of animals and to burn them.

Dukkhit

Anglicized mis-pronunciation of the word दुःखित ~~दुःखित~~ Sorry, repentant.

Eight-fold prostration

The human body is divided into eight main parts: hands, feet, chest, knees, etc. When all the eight parts touch the earth the prostration is complete. Such prostrations are reserved for divinities and persons, greatly respected.

Ghat

Flight of steps leading to a river or tank.

Ghee

Clarified butter.

Guardian spirit

There is a superstition amongst many that excessive love of money turns a man, on his death, into a *Yaksha*—a spirit condemned for ever to mount guard over the treasure amassed or acquired by him during his lifetime.

GLOSSARY

Guru

Preceptor ; one who initiates a man into the spiritual life and acts as his guide in spiritual matters.

Hookah

Hubble-bubble.

Howdah

A seat strapped on to the back of an elephant ; usually seats four persons.

I beg of you at your feet

In India respect is shown to elders and great men by touching their feet. The phrase means earnest entreaty.

Jah !

An expression of shy and affectionate reproof where the speaker is more in agreement than in opposition.

Jingle of dancing girls

It was customary among the rich Bengalis of the nineteenth century, which period is portrayed in the story, to arrange for frequent performances by dancing girls in their homes and to invite their friends to the same. This practice is extinct as it is not considered to be in good taste nowadays.

Joint Sahib

Joint Magistrate.

Kalindi

Kalinadi or black river, colloquial name for *Yamuna*, whose waters are dark. On its bank at Brindaban the Krishna of mythology sported with milkmaids.

GLOSSARY

Kandarpa

God of love in Hindu mythology.

Karna of old

Famous character in the Mahabharata, known for his valour, chivalry and charity. Said to have been born with *Kavacha* (armour) and a pair of *Kundals* (ear-rings) which protected him from death. Gave these away the day prior to the battle of *Kurukshetra* in which he was later killed.

Khansamas

Butlers.

Kirtan

Devotional songs of the Bengal Vaishnavas portraying the love of Krishna and Radha, which symbolizes the yearning of the votary to become merged in his Lord as also the yearning of the Lord for His votary.

Kulin's daughter

In the 7th century A.D. when morality was at a low ebb among the Brahmins and Kayasthas of Bengal, Adisura, king of Bengal, had five Brahmins and five Kayasthas of unquestioned integrity brought from Kanyakubja (now known as Kanauj) in Northern India and settled them in Bengal. The descendants of these immigrants formed the nucleus of a new aristocracy. In the 10th century, this aristocracy was given the official seal of recognition by king Ballal Sen and called *kulins*. They could only marry among themselves. As they were a very small community, many among them had to remain unmarried till the end of their lives for want of a suitable bride or bridegroom.

GLOSSARY

Lucknow style

Style of music peculiar to Lucknow, a Northern Indian town that had once been the playground of the Muslim Nawabs. Also known for its cultural life in those days and its old-world courtesy and etiquette.

Master-mashai

Teacher. *Mashai*, short for *mahashaya*, is used for addressing or referring to a person of some status.

Namaskar

Hindu form of greeting or farewell where the palms, folded together, are raised to the forehead.

Pan

Betel-leaves.

Papia

A variety of singing-bird.

Pargana

A sub-division in a district.

Pati

Husband ; lord.

Pishima

Father's sister or cousin.

Prajapati

Another name for Brahmā, one of the principal gods of the Hindu Pantheon ; popularly known as the god of marriage.

Purificatory immersion

To a Hindu, who considers spiritual purity inseparably connected with physical cleanliness, an immersion bath in flowing water just at dawn is an integral part of his daily life.

GLOSSARY

Radhanath Jiu

Radha's lord ; another name of Krishna. *Jiu* is a variation of *ji* (see ante.).

Religiously endowed property

Known in Bengal as *devottar* property, gift of free-hold land made to temples for their maintenance. These lands are non-taxable and non-transferable.

Sacred thread

Thread worn by a Brahmin over his shoulders from the day of his initiation.

Salaam

Muslim salutation where the right hand is raised to the forehead.

Sanai

A variation of the flute. It is an integral part of Hindu weddings and is played at regular intervals from early morning on the wedding day.

Sannyasi

A man who has renounced all worldly attachments.

Sannyasini

A woman ascetic.

Sari

Chief garment of Indian women. Consists of a piece of cloth, about five yards long, which is wound round the body in different styles.

Sepoy people broke out in mutiny

Refers to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 when Hindu and Muslim Sepoys (soldiers) under the East India Company rose in revolt all over India. Regarded as the first organized revolt of Indians against British rule.

GLOSSARY

Shimul

A variety of silk cotton tree found in great numbers in Bengal.

Some right action in a previous birth

Hindus (and also Buddhists) believe in the cycle of births. It is their firm conviction that a right action in one birth is bound to have its reward in the next.

Struck her forehead with the palm of her hand

It is popularly believed in India that one's fate is written on one's forehead. To strike the forehead is to strike at, or express disgust with, one's fate.

Sudras becoming Brahmins

According to Hindu tradition, a Brahmin must have certain spiritual qualities and lead a life of strict austerity. In the olden days it is supposed, there was no bar to even Sudras, the lowest caste, becoming Brahmins if they attained a certain spiritual height and led a life of the requisite austerity.

Swami

Head or high dignitary of a religious order.

Syces

Grooms for horses.

Tarka

Argument ; debate.

Thakur-bari

A private temple ; a separate building in the compound of a house set apart as a place of worship.

Tol

School for Sanskrit teaching, owned and run by a man of learning. *Tols* were an integral part of the educational

GLOSSARY

system of India till very recently. The students lived with the teacher and each of them received personal attention.

Up-country man

Term used by Bengalis to denote North Indians. Up-country men do not as a rule understand the niceties of Bengali cooking.

Vakya

Word ; speech.

Zemindary work

Administration of landed properties.

Zenana

Portion of the house set apart exclusively for the women-folk where no men other than near relatives may enter.

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CLOUD AND SUN

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FALSE HOPES

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English translations of some of Rabindranath Tagore's
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Hungry Stones and other stories, 1916

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Stories from Tagore, 1918

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The Parrot's Training and other stories published by the
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